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OFFWORLD™

THE ALL-NEW ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINE OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

NO. 1 FALL 1993

**FEATURING
— THE —
TALENTS OF**

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NOTKIN

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RICK WILBER

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MARKOPOULOS

NATHAN
MASSENGILL

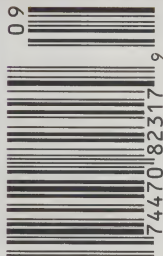
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OFFWORLD™

THE ALL-NEW ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINE OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

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COVER ART BY: MICHAEL WM. KALUTA

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WELCOME TO THE REALM OF **OFFWORLD**™

A PUBLISHERS NOTE ON INTRODUCTIONS, CHANGES, AND THANK YOU'S.

As Publisher of this little venture, I thought it would be appropriate to explain the reasoning behind the make up of our magazine **OFFWORLD** and what separates us from all the others.

The idea of any new magazine usually comes from someone saying to himself, "what I want to see or read isn't available."

You see as a fan of science fiction, a reader of fiction, and a viewer of almost anything that comes from "the tube" or hollywood, my one complaint about most magazines was the shortage of quality art. Granted, great fiction usually is in itself visually stimulating, but it always seemed that the visual element of most science fiction or fantasy mag's were practically nil...except for an occasional fantastic cover.

On the other hand, in the comic book market, the opposite has occurred. Most books are remembered for their art, as opposed to their stories. Periodically the two would mesh. In those cases, we all thanked our lucky stars.

But for those of us who wanted prose, instead of the sequential format of comics, we were mostly **out of luck**.

That's where we come in. The concept is rather a simple one. Take good stories, meld them with good art and combine them in a stimulating format that literally leaps out at you.

I'm proud to report that with our maiden voyage; we have accomplished our goal. Of course you the reader will be the final judge.

Read us, look at us, judge us and then spread the word. 'Cause without **you**, as they say, we're nothing! Let us know what you think, believe me we'll listen. Since we're a quarterly publication it's possible what you suggest could occur very quickly.

I, of course, feel we have a great magazine, one that both professionals and readers will grow to love and want to get issue after issue.

NOW A SIDEBAR

As many of you know our magazine was originally called **ADVANCED WARNING!** A title which I came up with over two years

ago, the name with which we have been promoting this magazine with. In fact a lot of you have subscribed to **ADVANCED WARNING!** and probably were a little surprised when you received our note about the change. At first we fought against the change, but decided that it was better to put out our Premiere edition on time then to wait 6 months or longer at the least while the attorneys squabbled. The so-called simple thing of changing our name, which many suggested or felt was an easy thing to do, wasn't. Just to come up with a new name that we felt represented our magazine and one that we thought would work wasn't so simple.

The people behind **ADVANCED WARNING!** spent almost one year formulating the design of the magazine. Every aspect of what you hold in your hand takes time to design and develop. Now in the matter of days, we had to go about redesigning a lot of what you see. From the logo design, the cover design had to be updated to fit the new name, the contents page as well as other things to many to mention. Finally, I can personally say that **OFFWORLD** actually is a better looking magazine then **ADVANCED WARNING!** was. I can proudly state that **OFFWORLD** is what we set out to create, the best illustrated magazine of its kind. With better stories and art then anything on the market today. Wait'll you see what we have planned for you in upcoming editions.

A personal thanks goes to Tony Williams who came up with our terrific new name.

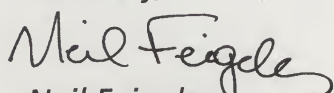
Now a personal note.

To my friends and family, I apologize for my time away. Its been almost two and one half years since I started trying to get this out. Because of my desire, sometimes I've been a little preoccupied. A special thanks goes to all the talented individuals who agreed to work for a new publication. Its a very special feeling to know that people would put their trust in you. A very special thanks to Laura, Ron, and Alex. And the most thanks go to Arnaldo and Tony. Your help in this endeavor will be forever remembered.

As they say, sometimes dreams do come true. And if this is only a dream. May I never wake up.

With warmest thanks and appreciations. I bid you welcome. Just turn the page and enter the Realm of **OFFWORLD**.

Sincerely,



Neil Feigeles

PUBLISHER



RETURN POST

By GEOFFREY NOTKIN

Illustrations By LURENE HAINES

ORBITAL STATION 1 VIA BRUSSELS STATION 7
TRANSMISSION REC 0087.MKM
DEC 16 20:04:53 HRS EST
VAN DER SANDEN, JONATHAN 004782VAND.J
TO:
MACKEY, GRAHAM


Graham,

We were lucky and only had to wait three days at the Outchange before being posted to a ship. They say that it usually takes much longer. The view from orbit is incredible. I wish you could have seen it for yourself.

I thought it would be sad to leave Earth, but it's all been pretty exciting so far; no time for morose thoughts. The transport leaves for Argus tomorrow.

You were right, Mull and Iona were beautiful. I stayed in the house you recommended, and the guy remembered you! I tried to spot the islands from up here, but they always seemed to be covered with clouds.

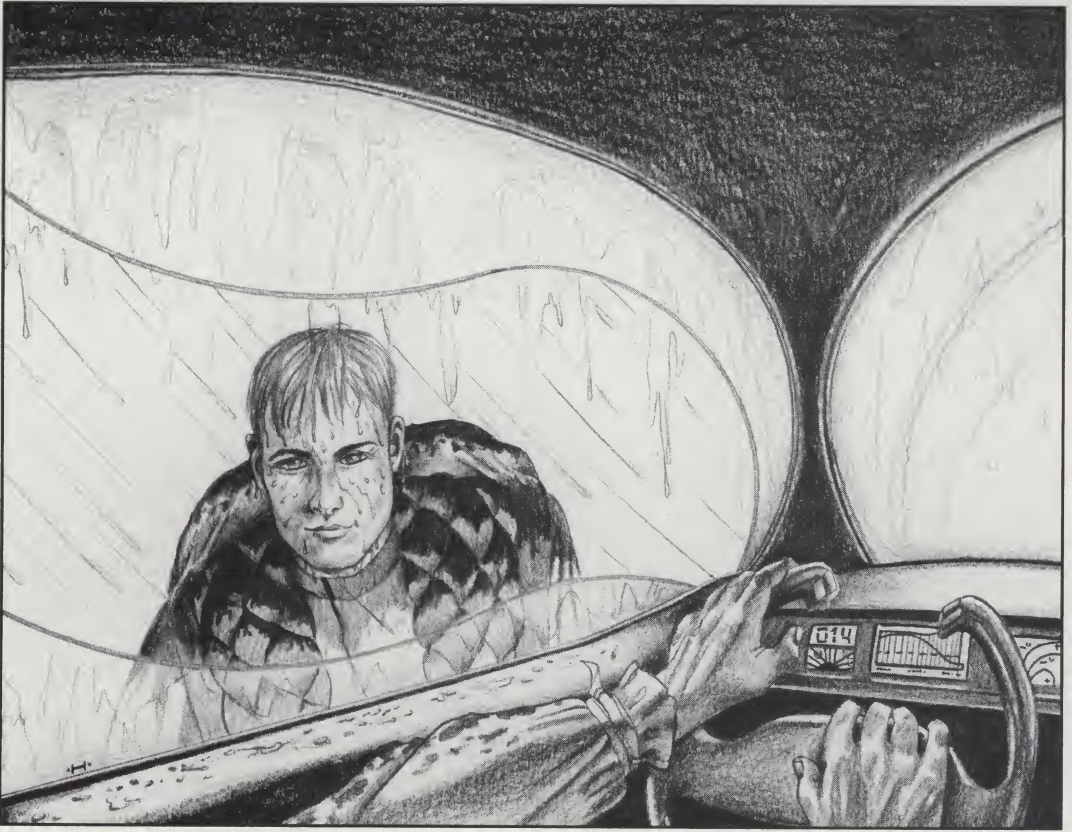
I'll transmit again when we arrive.
Thanks for everything. Your friend,
Jonathan.



he ferry was large, but not comfortable; the sea calm and black, and the ship steady upon it. I stood alone on the deck in the cold early-morning light, watching jellyfish wash by, their clear and delicate bodies like old moss wrapped up in cellophane bags.

I first saw land sometime after dawn. The low dark cliffs rushed out of the mists as if to surprise me. The railing felt coarse with salt and rust. I held on as we hit the dock. The ferry shuddered beneath me, and I felt it roll hard from side to side, more than a ship of that size should. A teacup that had been carelessly left out fell to the deck and broke. At the bow,

turbines pulled in the locking chain, and the vehicle ramp fell heavily onto concrete. My car, stowed outside and covered with rain and seawater, sat tied to restraining hooks in the deck plates. I climbed in and waited for the signal to disembark. The cold water washed in ripples over my windscreen.



Damp engines started. Trucks and jeeps clanked sullenly across the rusted iron ramp, steam from their hoods a pale shadow against the surrounding fog. There was no delay, no checking of directions. These were not tourists. The vehicles moved off down the single-track road. In the swirl of my window they were metal ants: ordered and purposeful.

A couple of passengers walked carefully across the ramp, then made for the cover of nearby trees. I pulled the car over to some old wooden shacks, which were boarded up and empty. The short burst of activity that had begun with the ferry's arrival ended abruptly. The crew had gone below decks, or vanished somewhere else, leaving the quay deserted. The rain increased, hammering the vacant parking lot and pounding loudly on my roof. In through the vents came a smell of wet concrete, bringing with it childhood memories of sports, forced runs on winter nights, shouting and mud, and of blood. The roof started to leak slightly. A drop fell on my neck, and rolled down under my collar. I started

sweating in the humid air. I tried the handle, wanting to tighten the seal of the window, but it was already closed all the way. I forced it and the hard plastic slipped in my palm, scratching the skin.

I put the car into gear and slowly eased away from the dockside. I drove carefully. My breath steamed up the windows and I wiped them with my left hand as I went. I passed too close to one of the outbuildings and heard something scrape along the bottom of my door. I veered away sharply and the car lurched through a deep pothole. I turned a corner by some black slate steps, and then there was something there with me; a dark shape through the vague and smeared water, like a fish glimpsed at the bottom of a pool.

There in the downpour stood a young man, motionless and unconcerned. Long straps from his army backpack hung almost to the ground, droplets streaming from them. His hair, short and blond, lay plastered against his head by the rain. I moved the car forward a few feet and rolled the window down. The rain poured

in, covering my arm and the steering wheel. He looked up at me, his face open and friendly, pale eyes the same grey as the sky. Unless someone was on their way to get him, he was lost. Sooner or later a guard would show up and get him for loitering, or whatever. A little memory turned around somewhere inside me, and reluctantly I moved the car across the water and mud that separated us.

"Do you need a ride?"

"I'm waiting for the bus. Do you know when it leaves?"

I looked behind me and tried to see through the steamed-up window but, of course, there was nothing.

"I have no idea," I answered. "Sorry."

The rain continued to fall on him, on the road, and on into my car. The clock in my dashboard counted away silently. I tried to figure how long I had until the next connection, but my mind was sluggish.

"There's supposed to be a bus to Tarbert." His voice interrupted my thoughts, and the numbers I had been juggling fell and were lost. "It should have left ten minutes ago." He held up a wet, crumpled piece of paper that flopped over and stuck to the back of his hand. "But this timetable's two years old." He seemed untroubled and quite content to wait.

"I could take you over to Tarbert." I heard the words bounce over to him as if someone else had said them. Tarbert was out of my way, and I didn't know if I had enough time to take him before my next ferry left. I also didn't want company, but it was too late for that now. "I don't think there's going to be anything coming through here. You could be stuck for hours."

"Well, okay then, thanks. If it's not out of your way." He grinned at me, then sneezed as he walked the few feet to my car.

I unlocked the door from the inside, and jumped out. One foot landed in a puddle, and I felt cold water run in through the air holes in the side of my

boot. I typed the combination onto the sensor pad below the trunk, and as the top whined open I helped him pull off his pack. We tossed the sodden thing inside, and the car's suspension settled very slightly as it adjusted to the new weight. We both got in, and he awkwardly removed his bulky coat, stuffing it behind the headrest where it fell and lay sprawled across the back seat.

The road twisted for miles through crowded pines. Once, an army aircar burst out of the clouds above us, its bulky grey-green body starkly outlined against the sky. The elevated canopy, covered with guns and antennae, sported the blue and red Eurostates Armed Forces emblem. The hard whine of jet engines shook our windows while the aircar crossed the open space between lines of trees. After that we saw no one until we joined the main road much later.

We drove in silence at first. Eventually he asked my name, and then I had to ask his.

"Jonathan."

"Where are you coming from?" I asked.

"I came over from Arran this morning. I spent a few days there. I've been travelling around on the island ferries and trying to make the connections with buses and hitches."

"You're brave to travel rough, up here."

"Oh, there's not much to worry about in Scotland. Everyone said it's very relaxed once you get over the border."

Scotland has always been different from the rest of Eurostates, but hitching is still illegal. There would have been trouble if any troops had come over on the ferry.

"I didn't mean it that way," I answered. "There are so few private cars around, it must be difficult."

"Well, I've managed okay so far." He smiled innocently, and seemed oblivious to any danger. "Thanks for picking me up. I'm soaked." He patted his trousers. They were dark with moisture. "But it's still the best way to travel."

There in the
downpour
stood a young
man, motion-
less and unconcerned.
Long straps from his
army backpack hung
almost to the ground.

"I doubt that." I looked over at him, feeling irritation already beginning to grow. He peered happily out of the side window. A tuft of wet hair stuck to his temple like masking tape. "I've never really cared for hitch-hiking. It's not safe. When I go somewhere, I like to know when I'm going to get there."

"But what about the adventure, the weird people you meet on the way? I wouldn't have met you. Not that I mean you're weird or anything," he laughed brightly and a bit nervously. "I just mean you do meet some really odd characters. I got stuck in a little village in Wales last week. I couldn't get a ride out, so the guy at the gas station said I could stay with him for a couple of days. His wife brought me tea in the room; it was really nice. The next morning he tried to talk me into hiring him as a driver. He said he would give me a discount on the room if I agreed. I didn't know I'd have to pay, I thought he was being friendly. I only had a little money, so I said okay then slipped out that night." He laughed again.

"Where in Wales was that?"

"I don't know. I can't pronounce those Welsh names. Tannibelk or something."

"Oh yeah, I know the town you mean. I was there. It's Tan-y-Bwylch."

"Have you driven up from Wales?"

"No, this is going back years. What you said about hitching reminded me."

Those weren't happy memories for me, but he asked a lot of questions about what I'd done in Wales, where I'd been. He seemed really interested, and in the end he dragged most of the story out of me.

"I spent a summer vacation there as a kid. My parents rented some fallen-down house in the mountains, with another family. We were miles from anywhere, and had to drive down the mountainside to get into town whenever we needed something. I'd always go along because there was nothing else to do. My father and I went into town one morning with the other family. Somehow we got

separated and they left without us. At first it didn't seem too bad, my father was a big man and he never panicked about anything. He decided to make an adventure out of it: we would hitch-hike."

I paused for a second because I felt that I'd started to ramble. He looked at me to see why I'd stopped talking, so I continued.

"After a while it started to rain. We walked out of town because my father said it would be easier to get a ride. We went a mile or two, and I started to get really cold and damp. I asked if we could take a taxi home. Then he told me that he'd left his wallet in the car. Can you believe it? I thought we might never get back."

"Your first and last experience! It doesn't sound too bad." He didn't seem much impressed by my story.

"Yes, it was my last experience; it was a disaster. I felt so embarrassed that we didn't

have a car, and that we had to walk in the rain. No one stopped for us, all those cars passing by. I looked away every time so the drivers couldn't see my face.

"So we stand there by the road, at the edge of a field. My father has his thumb out when a patrol car passes on the other side of the road. It drives by, then turns around and comes back. It was E.S. Police, you know, come to help us. They stop, the doors slide back and two of them get out and stomp over in their black boots and those helmets ... with the big visors, like insect heads. My father's a nice guy, and he asks them something in a friendly way. Right away they tell him to shut up, and start shouting and asking all kinds of dumb questions. One of them pulls a truncheon out of his belt and starts poking my father with it. He looked like a different person next to them: short and helpless. I thought they were going to take both of us away and kill us. I was terrified."

"Did you both get arrested?"

"No. Right about then, thank God,

I looked over at him, feeling irritation already beginning to grow. He peered happily out of the window. A tuft of wet hair stuck to his temple like masking tape.

another car pulls up. Someone from the house had come looking for us. He managed somehow to smooth everything over with the E.S. cops, and we got home okay. So yeah, that was my last experience hitch-hiking."

"But it worked out okay. No one got hurt."

"Yeah, barely. And the whole thing was because my father forgot his stupid wallet. Later he said I should have had some money with me, just in case. I was just a kid! I didn't have any money. You expect your parents to take care of those things when you're young."

Jonathan had been gazing out of the window while we talked. He seemed fascinated, thrilled almost, by the passing landscape.

"I guess you don't have a travel permit."

"No, I don't." He answered me without looking away from the window.

"You know, you could get in real trouble."

He said nothing, but seemed unconcerned, pulling one of his jacket sleeves through the space between the seats, and wringing it out on the floor.

TRANSIT STATION 25 VIA BRUSSELS STATION 7
TRANSMISSION REC 0344.MKM
MAR 08 22:23:06 HRS EST
VAN DER SANDEN, JONATHAN 004782VAND.J
TO:
MACKEY, GRAHAM

Graham,
The trip to Argus was very long and cramped, but we made the best of it.

I got a lot of reading and sleeping done although there weren't many books around - because of the weight I guess. There's no on-board library or anything, so there were some pretty lame things circulating around the passenger decks. Met some interesting people; unavoidable since we were so tightly packed.

Not allowed to transmit during the trip for security reasons, and now that we've arrived in orbit there's been a big rush to get to the transmit booths.

We got up into the viewing lounge for a few minutes this morning, and I saw another planet up close for the first time in my life! I thought it would seem so strange and different from Earth, but it's sort of welcoming. It looks yellow though, and that might take some getting used to. Tomorrow we go down to the surface.

Hope you're well. Will transmit again when I'm settled.

Your friend, JONATHAN

"Is your tape player working?"

"Yes," I answered, "do you want to hear something?" wanting quiet and knowing that whatever he wanted to hear I wouldn't have.

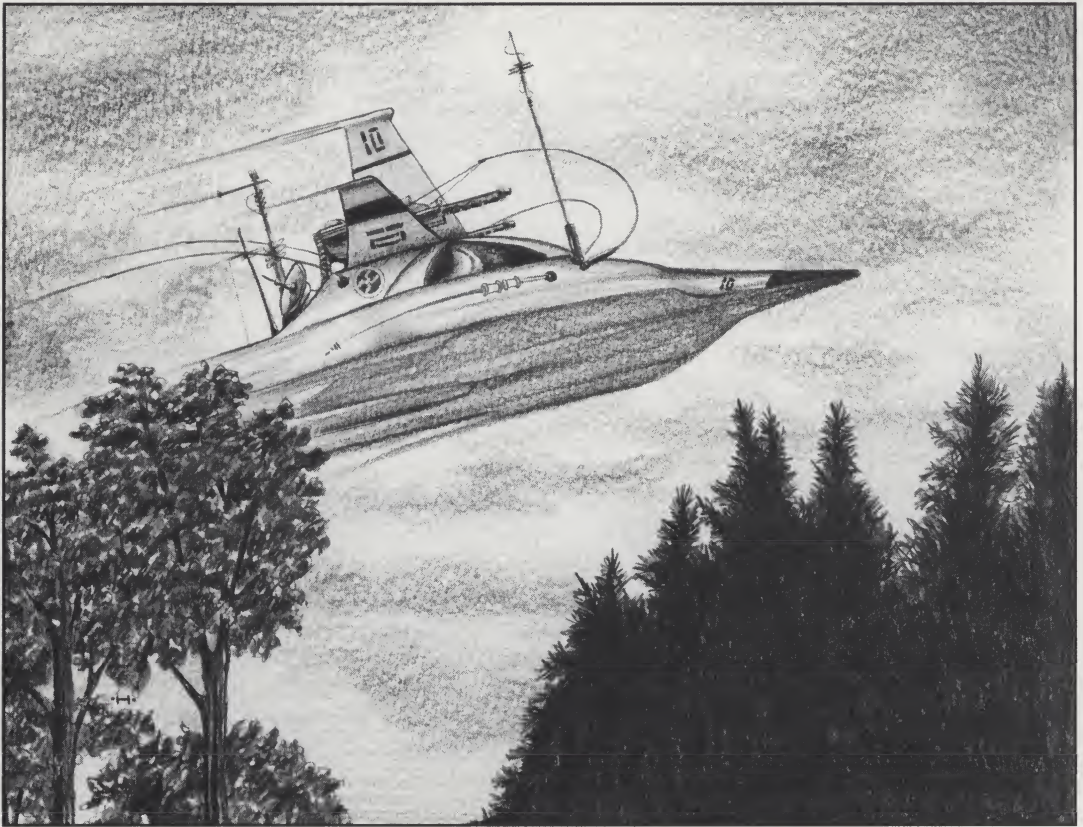
"Anything you like. What do you listen to?"

I flipped a switch, and the little storage compartment door slid open, showing a jumble of digitapes. He began to rummage through them, taking out a couple to study their labels.

"I lost most of my music when I left home. I haven't heard anything new in ages."

"Where's home?" I asked, as it seemed required.

"South Africa. Well, that's where I was born, but I've spent as little time there as possible since I left school." I felt sure he was looking at me out of the corner of his eyes, trying to see if his admission would get a bad reaction. Most people were hostile to anyone who wasn't from



Eurostates.

"Some good music's come out of your country."

"Yes." He relaxed a bit, and settled back slightly into his seat. "What South African music do you know?"

I tried to remember the name of one of those banned multi-racial groups that I'd heard at a party. "Only Mapinduzi Justice," I said.

He stopped fumbling with his jacket, and turned around in his seat to face me.

"Really? I'm surprised! I didn't think you could get their stuff here."

"You can't. A friend played it for me in America."

"Which record?" he asked.

"The first one. The one with 'Copper Sky' on it."

"Oh that wasn't the first one," he said with certainty. "They had four D-tapes out before that."

"Really?" I'm not too interested in music, I only mentioned it then to show that I didn't hate his country. "What is Mapinduzi anyway, is that a town?"

"Oh no, it's a Swahili word, it means

'revolution,' although literally, 'turn over.' They're a very political band, but 'Copper Sky' is commercial. You've got to hear their earlier stuff. I'd make you a tape, except that I've been posted." He seemed to have lost a bit of his enthusiasm. "Still, give me your address anyway. Maybe I can send you something, at least a postcard. I love to write, I just don't have many people left to write to."

"Okay, sure. Have you been posted up here to do research work?" Even as I asked I knew the answer. Someone from outside Eurostates would never get to work at a government station.

"No, nothing like that. I'm being sent up through the Outchange. I wanted to spend my last few days on Earth seeing the islands."

"Why here? It's so empty."

"Partly because of that. I'll probably be stuck on a space transport for ever, so I'm going to enjoy some open country while I can. Also, I've always wanted to see Scotland – it's always seemed so mysterious."

What he'd said about being stuck was

probably right. The trips to the colony planets, or wherever else they put you, were long; a few months at least.

"Are you looking forward to it?" I asked. "Off to a new life and all that?" But who would be looking forward to forced re-settlement?

"Well, I did volunteer," he answered.

There weren't any more volunteers. There had been at first, of course, but after a while personal transmits started coming back. Then everyone realized how grim the re-settlement program really was, and the number of people willing to go dropped off sharply. So Brussels decided that if they couldn't ease Eurostates' overcrowding by sending people who wanted to go, they'd send people who didn't want to go, and the whole business of shipping misfits, malcontents and convicts began. Sometimes the unemployed or the unemployable got the free trip. And the orders must have kept coming down from Brussels to send out more, because those big shuttles that carried the unlucky ones up to the Outchange were always full. I didn't rate this Jonathan as a criminal or an activist, but he had to have done something.

We drove on, and I felt the water sop around in my boot. Jonathan stared out of the window and I guess he was wondering what lay in store for him at the Outchange. At least by then I knew why he wasn't afraid of being arrested. They were already deporting him, what else could they do?

"Why did you leave home after school?"

Before answering, he looked at me crookedly, wondering how frank he should be. "I didn't want to do military service, so I left."

"Left?"

"Well, deserted. I got as far as Spain where I bought a work permit, but it didn't do me any good. I guess they stuck me with a bad fake because I got arrested two days later, after signing on to a work party."

"That's why you're being deported? Just for that!"

"Not exactly. I was under Eurostates jurisdiction when I got arrested, but the South African government wanted me back. Instead of being sent to S.A. to face the music, I volunteered for the Outchange. They had to let me go. I even got my four weeks' departure leave."

"They give you a vacation?"

"They have to. It's guaranteed for all volunteers; government stipend and all. It's not much, but it pays for the food."

"But surely it would be better to go back home, do your time, and then start again. At least you'd still be on Earth."

"No." He paused. "I don't think it would be any better."

"Well, then, what's to stop you from just taking off into the mountains when you've done your four weeks?"

He held up his left arm, the sleeve slipped back tamper-proof, chrome tracking bracelet, to his wrist. A pale green light glowed along one of its edges, giving his skin an odd color.

"At least you've had a chance to do some travelling." I even managed a smile.

To make conversation, I asked if he knew anything about the

Outchange.

"Quite a lot, actually. I've become very interested in it recently. Did you know it's the largest single structure ever built?"

"Yes, I've heard all about it: observation platform, research station, and whatever else they can think of."

"What do you mean?"

"No, nothing, go on." There wasn't any scientific work going on up there, it was just another weapons platform. And a transit station for people like him.

"It's impressive though, don't you think? I mean the scale of it."

I had to agree with him on that at least. Even before they finished it, you could see the Outchange from the ground, if you were in the right place. It seemed like it should have grown slowly, starting as a tiny light in the night sky, like one of the early satellites. Then gradually, over a period of years, it would become this

He held up his left arm, and the sleeve slipped back tamper-proof, chrome tracking bracelet, to his wrist. A pale green light glowed along one of its edges.

massive floating structure that you could see even in the daytime. Somehow it didn't happen that way, it just seemed to appear. I remember first seeing it one evening a little after sunset, looking like an impossibly small model of an old aircraft carrier. Aerials and telescopes stuck out from all angles, and it hung there, upside down, pasted to the reddening dome of the sky. I was shocked. How could something on the edge of space be visible? It didn't seem like it could be real. Then, later, I got the job with the research group working on lenses for the high definition cameras they used on the platform, so I learned a lot more about it.

For a long time I thought I'd be sent to the Outchange myself, for temporary work. There were two or three photographic staff posted there to service the lenses and do odd jobs. I asked to be assigned for one tour, thinking it would be an experience to see Earth from orbit. I never did get to make the trip, but I knew some techs who had. They said it got quite rough up there, so in the end I was glad that it hadn't worked out.

There were a lot of civilians going

through, and most were leaving some kind of trouble behind on Earth. The army ran everything. All outbound passengers went up by standard orbital shuttle, and were unloaded at the Outchange where they waited for their transport assignment. Most didn't know their final destination, and the waiting period could be long. A transient culture of sorts had grown up, and, as in most places where people are forced to wait for long periods of time, all sorts of questionable services were available for a price. Some trafficking in postings went on, but whether one destination was really preferable to another, I don't know. I didn't mention any of this to Jonathan because that kind of information isn't reliable, and I didn't feel like I'd be doing him any favors by repeating it. I asked where they were sending him, but he didn't know, and guessed it would be one of the new colonies. There were a few possible destinations, and with more planets and asteroids being charted all the time, you could wind up almost anywhere. Life would be grim. I didn't envy him.

COLONY STATION 1176 VIA BRUSSELS STATION 7
TRANSMISSION REC 7768.MKM
AUG 20 09:51:42 HRS EST
VAN DER SANDEN, JONATHAN 004782VAND.J
TO:
MACKEY, GRAHAM

Good morning. Sorry it's been such a long silence, hard to get transmit time, and very expensive. I've been here almost 5 months now. It's barren, and the low, broken hills go right on to the horizon. There are small, hard crystals embedded in the rocks and they reflect the light at sunset. Sometimes I just stare out of the porthole and realize that I'm not in the same part of the universe where I was born. It's an eerie feeling, but I've kind of grown to like my new life.

I have comfortable quarters near the edge of the settlement, and some good friends. Also, a fantastic job: I work for the Exploration and Surveying department, looking for raw materials. I get to go everywhere in a surface rover (although they won't let me drive it). We've been excavating in a spectacular ravine. The finds are really strange. They have the geologist in a foul mood because he can't figure out their composition. He's probably not really a geologist at all, just another misfit like me.

More next time. I'm tired now, and sick with some mild fever that's going around. I've been off expeditions for a week, but am enjoying the rest. Your friend, JONATHAN

P.S. Come and visit; you'd hate it here.

We came out of the forest and onto a long sloping section of road that led down to flat heathland. There were almost no trees, just the coarse grass and heather that thrive in thin, peaty soil. We picked up a lot more traffic, and off in the distance I could see the first of the research complexes: mean, low buildings of slate and granite stretching into the distance. A few battered aircars were parked haphazardly on the open ground to our left, and some technicians in their gray-and-yellow jumpsuits were busy examining one of them. Odd, unrecognizable parts lay scattered about underneath it. One of the techs held a component up as we passed, and was gazing into its innards. There were no other workers around, as the main shift didn't start for an hour or two.

Most of the vehicles we saw were military, and every now and then a state car, with its red-and-black-helmeted driver. The barracks, factories and labs stretched on and on, the small patches of open ground between them mostly paved over. Eventually the road rose out of the industrial area, and we saw the first sign for Tarbert.

"Where are you headed after Tarbert?" I asked.

"On to the islands, to Mull and Iona."

"Well, you've picked a lovely place to visit. It's one of the last areas that's really untouched."

"Have you been there yourself?"

"Yes," I answered, "a while ago, but it won't have changed too much. It's very remote." I asked how long he had left before he shipped out, and he said about two weeks.

"It's enough time." I gave him a few suggestions of things to see, talking quickly and enthusiastically as I remembered my times there, and then soon we were on the steep, narrow stretch of road that leads down to Tarbert. The sun peeped out as we got near the town, and it lit up the old stone waterfront

buildings, tinting them a warm ochre. I pulled the car over to a fuel stop, and Jonathan got out while I bought a cartridge and broke the seal. I slotted it into the receiver, and walked over to stand with him while it emptied. We'd stopped on a hilly road that ran up out of town, and, standing there, we had a fine view of the whole bay. Rocky islands sat off in the distance. An ancient fishing boat rounded the point and churned slowly into the harbor, its ragged nets strewn in bunches across the deck. The old diesel engine left a thin trail of blue smoke across the water. Birds wheeled around, their black eyes scouring the boat's wake for scraps of food.

"It's amazing, isn't it? So little has changed up here. Look how old that boat is. I mean, how can they possibly make a living from it?"

"I don't know," I answered, "I guess it's mostly through self-sufficiency."

"Oh, they couldn't possibly be self-sufficient! Brussels would never let them get away with it." He smiled, as though it was a joke, but he sounded bitter.

"Well, I don't know how they do it, but it doesn't seem like too bad a way to live."

"No," he answered with a frown, "I think it would be terribly hard, going to the sea every day, in every kind of weather, in a small boat like that. I couldn't do it."

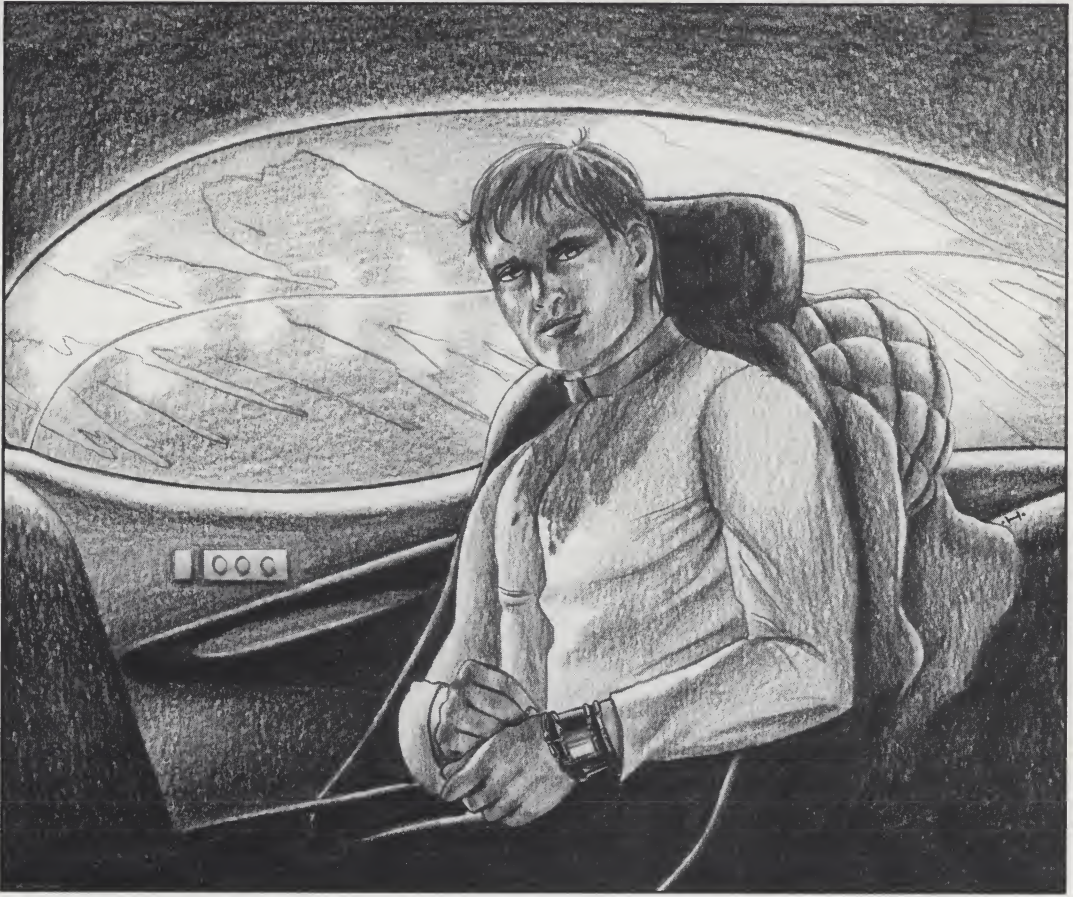
He was so naive. I wanted to argue with him but it was pointless. Hard as a fisherman's life is, there's still something hopelessly romantic about it. In any case, it had to be preferable to what he had in store.

"Would you stay here if you could?" I asked.

"Not if I had to do that."

He had his mind made up, so we spoke of it no further, and instead walked down the hill to the stone promenade that circles the inlet, and around which the town had

There were a lot more civilians going through, and most were leaving some kind of trouble behind on Earth. The army ran everything.



been built. Some of the newer buildings came into view, and they spoiled the atmosphere a little, but not too much.

We bought some sandwiches and sat with our feet hanging over the edge of the harbor wall, the soles of our boots ten or fifteen feet above the oily water. The smell of salt and fish was as strong as any smell I can remember. A few gulls came upon us right away. They always know when you have food, and Jonathan threw pieces of crust to them. They were big brutes, unafraid of us; one came right up and snatched a piece from his hand before he had a chance to toss it.

"Graham, would you be interested in going on to Mull with me? I'd like the company."

I really did think about it for a moment before I said no. I thought first of the sleek green hills, with mist in the valleys, and then of the sturdy stone cottage where I'd stayed with Annika so many years ago, and of the old and dear friendship, lost through carelessness and

neglect. Then, I thought of the job that Jonathan didn't know about, and that I had to report in.

We made a few enquiries around the town, and found out where the Oban bus stopped. Jonathan said he'd walk, but I realized that in a few moments he'd be gone, sliding inexorably towards his departure, forced to leave the grey Earth forever. And I wanted to help, wanted to take him those extra few yards.

The weather had cleared up. The sky out to sea was grey and blue and a little lilac – a Marie Laurencin sky. It would be a pleasant wait. I opened up the trunk again, and helped him with the pack, which was still damp.

The gulls were shrieking down by the fishing promenade. The moored boats creaked against each other, and a car passed us, going up the hill. I said goodbye to him, and good luck, and all that, but I felt awkward. Maybe because I had a government job and could stay, and he couldn't. He must have known, because I

couldn't have had a private car unless I was doing government work. Work for a government that was sending him to the Outchange and then to who-knew-what god-forsaken barren planet or asteroid? But he thanked me for the ride and for the company, and I could see that he meant it. He asked me again if I was sure I didn't want to go on to the islands with him.

As I drove off up the hill and into the trees that began at the edge of town, I looked in the mirror, and for a second I saw him standing, smiling in the sunshine, waiting for the bus that would take him to Oban. I thought again of Mull and Iona, of the old abbey with the doves in the tower, and of the silent graveyard behind it where Macbeth is buried, and imagined that I could turn around, that I could miss the connection. But that would cost me the job. And it was a government job. And I was afraid.

Then I had passed around a curve in

the road and Jonathan had moved out of sight. Now he existed only to the bus driver or to some other traveller who might give him a ride, and it was too late for me to go back.

One grey morning, not too long ago, "Copper Sky" came on the radio. I hadn't heard it in many years, and it brought back sharp memories of that day.

I stare out onto a very different landscape now, but just for that moment, my rain-swept window pane looked much like the old car's windshield. It reminded me of Jonathan, and I wondered where he ended up and how he made out. I regretted that I'd slipped away without giving him my address. Slipped away because I was busy and didn't have time to correspond with someone I'd given a ride to on a rainy day, someone who was being sent away. I still wonder what he would have written.

*

COLONY STATION 1176 VIA BRUSSELS STATION 7
OFFICIAL TRANSMISSION CODED XO 7763.K
SEP 02 14:13:07 HRS EST
KITA, DR ALFRED 0832KITA.A
TO:
FEDAI, LT. COL. J 0006FEDA.J 7763.K(R)

Sir,

Regret to report that a second member of the survey team working at the archaeological site died today of an unidentifiable ailment. The casualty was Jonathan Van der Sanden, an unskilled conscript. One of first to enter the area, he exhibited the same symptoms as the other patient who died two days ago. Eleven other cases are in the emergency ward, some appear to be serious. I fear that an epidemic is possible or even likely at Argus colony. Worse, we suspect that the transport ship that departed here last week for Earth may be contaminated too.

We have sealed the colony, and closed down all non-official communication. A meteorite impact has been blamed for the blackout.

One odd item: Van der Sanden's personal effects included copies of several transmissions to a Graham Mackey. There was no contact number or destination code. They were beamed as far as Brussels, but not relayed. Don't know what this means, possibly camouflage to prevent us identifying the recipient? There was one reference to the dig site, so Van der Sanden was obviously passing on classified information. We do not know Mackey's location but suggest you attempt to find him. All of Van der Sanden's records have been destroyed at this end, no other action taken as yet. Await your instructions anxiously.

KITA



The NEIGHBORHOOD

By NAT GERTLER

Illustrations By LAURA FREEMAN

Whenever I try to think about what made my neighborhood special, it always comes back to one thing: Mrs. O'Leary's air conditioner. Now, everyone thinks that where they grew up was special. Everyone knows that their village, their city, their suburb is not just a place, but a Place of Significance. The world, in some unlikely way, revolves around their home town. And for themselves, they're right. But my town really is different from everywhere else, though I never realized it until I moved away.

Mrs. O'Leary was a proud woman. She was proud of her house, she was proud of her porch, she was proud of her garden, and she had a right to be, because they were all very nice. She would spend summer days out on the porch, making herself part of the whole picture that she loved so much. Rocking in her chair, she'd do needlework, waving to anyone who walked by. They all glanced at her house, as if to say, "Look! Nice house, nice person!"

And she was a nice person. Sure she'd yell at us if our makeshift football games got even halfway across the Tirellis', her next door neighbors', lawn. "You kids! You keep that football out of my garden! I

remember what you did to my mum!" One damaged chrysanthemum three years ago had made her ever vigilant, ever alert. Still, about once a week she would stop the game with a tray of chocolate chip cookies, which we eagerly devoured while they were still too hot to be eaten without us breathing funny.

Mrs. O'Leary (there must have been a Mr. O'Leary once upon a time, but I never knew him) claimed the cookies were a "bribe" to keep us off her lawn. Everybody knew that was a lie, just like we knew it was a lie when she would say that the reason she sat on her porch all summer was that it was too hot inside. The kids knew that she was on the porch to guard

her mums. The parents knew she was out on the porch to keep an eye out for any single old men who might happen by. Both of these suppositions were wrong, of course, but the point is that everyone knew she was lying.

Everyone but Mrs. O'Leary's son, that is (which is as it should be; a boy should always believe his mother). Mrs. O'Leary's son had grown up and moved to the city. Nobody knew which city, but it didn't matter, because it was "the city".

All cities were "the city". Like half of all small town boys who moved to the city, Mrs. O'Leary's son had found success. (The other half found ruination; no small town boy had ever grown up and moved to the city and "made ends meet" or "got by".) With his success and a boy's proper love for his mother, he sought to return something, to send his mother a luxury that she would really appreciate.

He sent her an air conditioner.

It was one of those large window models, and when it arrived, Mrs. O'Leary "ooh-ed" and "ah-ed" over it. After all, not only was it a gift that expressed her son's love, but it was also monstrously large for any appliance that didn't wash anything. She spent some time just running her hand over the lovely fake wood grain veneer of the control panel. Then she called the local handyman (who happened to be my best friend, Ben's, father) to have him set up the air conditioner. It was then that it all started, comparatively speaking.

First, Ben's father wanted to carry it upstairs and install the air conditioner in the bedroom. He had lugged the heavy machine halfway up the stairs before Mrs. O'Leary realized what he intended to do and stopped him. "You bring that air conditioner back down and install it in the living room!" she demanded.

"You should have this in the bedroom. That way, you can just sit up there," said Ben's father. He was as reasonable a man as a father could be.

She would have none of that. "This air

conditioner, it's a gift from my son, my successful son! It shows how much he loves me! Now, what kind of mother would I be if I took this symbol of my son's love and hid it up in my bedroom where nobody goes? It belongs in the living room."

Ben's father held his ground for five minutes, attempting to convince her otherwise, but this was a matter of love, not reason. Mrs. O'Leary would not be moved, so the air conditioner was carried back down the stairs and into the living room.

The air conditioner was too large to fit into either of the small side windows, so it had to go into the large front window, which was just fine by Mrs. O'Leary. "That way, everybody who walks by will be able to see what my son bought me."

Ben's father was hefting the awkward appliance into the window frame when Mrs. O'Leary let out a scream. "What are you doing?!?!"

Utterly befuddled by this question, Ben's father opted to state the obvious. "I'm putting your son's air conditioner in the living room window."

"Yes, but you're putting it in with that ugly wire mesh end pointing out. You're going to ruin my lovely porch!"

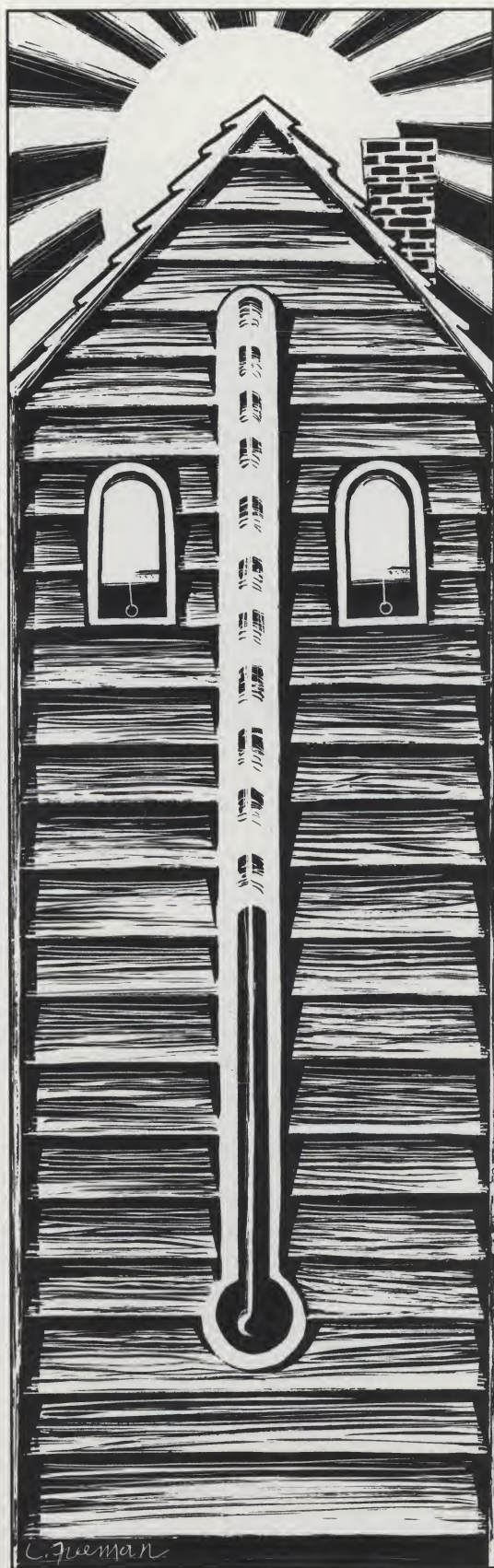
A simple misunderstanding. Ben's father was sure he could handle it. "I gotta put that end out or else the air conditioner won't work."

"Don't be silly. You plugged it in when it was sitting on the floor, and it ran. Don't be telling me that just because you put it in the window, it isn't going to work."

Ben's father realized he was dealing with someone horribly unschooled in the ways of air conditioners, and he set out to correct the situation, using slow, short sentences and plenty of semi-meaningful hand gestures. He explained how the cool air came out the end with the simulated wood grain veneer, and that that end had to be on the inside of the house, or it wouldn't work.

Mrs. O'Leary was unmoved. She insisted that the veneer side be pointed out to the porch. Ben's father protested,

Ben's father was hefting the awkward appliance into the window frame when Mrs. O'Leary let out a scream. "What are you doing?!?!"



argued, and cajoled, to absolutely no avail. Finally, he stormed out of the house, protesting that "I'm a handyman, by heavens, and a good one, and am not about to be turned into a crazy man doing crazy things for crazy people."

The stubborn Mrs. O'Leary was not without resources, however. She headed into her kitchen, and, quicker than you or I could mix the batter, she made and baked a batch of peanut brownies, and mixed up an oversized pitcher of lemonade. With these as inducements, she quickly enticed us away from our football game to help with the air conditioner.

The lure of these refreshments brought all of us: me, Ben, Lenny, The Face, Whitney, Greg, Harold, Johnny 1, Johnny 2, Jodie (who we let play with us because she sure didn't seem like a girl), and Holly (who we let play with us because she seemed very much like a girl, and we were beginning to like that). Even Littlest Jones, out stray-ball-fetcher, score-keeper, and all-around peewee sidekick, came along. After all, it was a scorcher of a day, a good 96° out there, and that ice-cold lemonade would recharge our batteries.

In fact, it was so hot now that we were getting worried. We'd learned in Old Lady Shlenk's science class that the human body sweats to carry excess heat away from the body and out to the cooler air. We were afraid that the temperature would hit exactly 98.6° and stay there. With no difference in temperature between ourselves and the outside, the heat would have nowhere to flow and would just build up until we suddenly burst into flames. At the time, this theory had as many reasonable aspects as unreasonable aspects, so we figured that we'd better try to cool off, just to be sure.

After we succeeded in turning an entire platter full of brownies into stray crumbs and satisfied chomping noises, it was time to hold up our end of the deal. As impressive as the weight of the "symbol of a son's love" was, we managed to work together and hoist it into the window frame. Being of the age where such things mattered, I positioned myself carefully alongside Holly, so that



our arms rubbed when we lifted it. Littlest Jones, too short to help with the lifting, proved useful in holding the electrical cord. Greg and Johnny 2 ran out to the porch to keep us from dropping the air conditioner out the window. Once it was in place, they turned it on, and then came back in and rejoined us.

We stayed around and talked with Mrs. O'Leary, even though there was no more lemonade or brownies to be had, because we were polite and, besides, she'd found half a chocolate cake. The air conditioner hummed away in the background but, just like Ben's dad had explained, the house didn't cool down at all. Quite the opposite, in fact; it got progressively warmer inside, until we were forced to abandon the last vestiges of the cake and head back out to play.

Outside, it was wonderful. The air conditioner was doing its job, and the entire neighborhood had cooled down to a comfortable 72°. It was still warm enough to remind us it was summer, but we were able to play with renewed energy and vigor, freed from both the drain of oppressive heat, and concerns over what we would later come to know as

"spontaneous human combustion" (but which we then thought of as "turning into a Human Torch like in the comic books").

Mrs. O'Leary left the air conditioner running during the day, that summer and every summer. It always kept the neighborhood at a nice comfortable 72°, which kept people wasting the summer hiding from the heat. People stayed out more, played more, held cookouts, and cut their lawns just a bit more often. Every once in a while, when Mrs. O'Leary was out shopping, some joker would sneak onto the porch and turn the air conditioner onto its highest setting, chilling the neighborhood to about 40°. Someone would then have to put on a sweater and head over to Mrs. O'Leary's porch, and turn the air conditioner back down to the usual level. But usually, it was as comfortable as no place else could be, and that's what made the town wonderful.

Of course, Mrs. O'Leary's living room was ridiculously warm all the time, but Mrs. O'Leary didn't mind. It just gave her one more excuse to go sit out on the cool, cool porch, guard her garden, and wave a friendly wave at every passerby.





HE WONDERS, AS HE CUTS HIS WAY

By RICK WILBER

Illustrations By JUSTIN LEITER

High on the juice and enjoying each moment of it, Teddy giggles as he runs—a thin, sharp bark of a giggle that squeaks out as he hits the window in mid-stride and sends shards of glass flying while he hits the ground outside in a running roll and sprints for the gate.

He looks back once. The two bodyguards who chased him through four rooms and two long hallways are drawn up short at the shattered window. He sees them throw those delicately balanced double-edged knives that the Crael merchants have made famous, and he smiles as the knives fall well short. He turns and sprints for the slowly closing palace gate.

There are more guards in the way, and in the final thirty meters he dodges two more thrown blades, pauses twice to dispatch clumsy gate guards who try stupidly to slow him down, and then makes it through the gate just before it

thuds shut, iron-banded wood against stone wall supports.

Made it.

He giggles again to think of how it has gone, of how he peeled the brocade from the Empire tunic he wore to the fat little emperor's party. The wire was within the stitching, and came cleanly from it. He wrapped it around his right index finger, sauntered smilingly up behind the jovial buffoon, then uncoiled the wire and went for the emperor's throat. He meant to kill the pudgy fool with one swift movement, slicing through the windpipe and the carotid with one swift, tight crossing of the hands behind the neck.

Instead, he slipped on the emperor's spilled wine, the very wine he'd brought the new ruler of all Crael as a personal gift. It was a perfectly fine California Riesling, estate-bottled by the Mount Palomar winery back in 1985, before the Collapse, before the S'hudonni brought their profits to a backward Earth, before he was recruited from the devastation that followed and given his chance at success within the mercantile Empire.

The emperor was not used to Earth wines, and, sip by sip, grew more unsteady. And the shallow Crael bowls did not lend themselves to unsteadily held liquids, so there was a certain spillage.

Ted smiles to think of it. His slip had been comic, he admits to himself. He'd tumbled backward, trying to regain his balance, his tall, too-thin gangly frame all long arms and legs. It must have been a sight, the wire flipping madly in his right hand as he struggled for equilibrium.

Somewhere in the back of his mind he wonders why this all should be funny, wonders why he isn't terrified at his own mistakes, why he feels so very fine in the midst of all this deadly comedy.

But that small kernel of doubt is walled off from his action; Mother's mix has seen to that. He knows the questions are there, knows of the danger, the terror, the heart-stopping fear of failure and death that should be all he can think about now.

But he doesn't care. It's that simple, really. He just doesn't care.

Instead, he recalls as he runs how he fell, finally, firmly onto his backside, and the emperor turned to gaze at him with those liquidly vertical-slit pupils. There was a smile at first, almost a guttural laugh, the emperor finding it funny. And then he saw the wire and realized what had nearly happened.

Ted's grin widens as he runs down an ancient alleyway. There were shouts, accusations, some pushing and shoving.

The opportunity for the assassination was clearly past. Ted gave up on it and ran. Quite embarrassing. Some great agent he'd turn out to be.

He is in the end of the alley, down behind a pile of discarded, rotting cane furniture that has been tossed from the second or third story above. Safe enough for the moment. He keys in his ship, touching tongue to molar for contact.

"Mother?"

"Here, Ted," she answers. "It didn't go well, did it?"

"No, not well. I, uh, well..." he hesitates, smiles to himself, can't resist it. "I just slipped up, that's all."

He can almost hear her sigh.

"Did you hurt him at all? Anything serious enough to give the rebels some hope for popular support?"

"'Fraid not. And I left the Reisling behind, too. Only half of it was gone."

She ignores that last part. "I'll be down in seven minutes, Ted. At the park. Can you get there?"

"No problem. These guys move pretty slow in this cool weather."

"Don't count on that, Ted. Remember they use sun rooms for the duty guards."

"Right." He had forgotten that. There will be fresh, and fast, guards after him by now. He has a good half-kilometer to cover to reach the pick-up spot, some of it through open areas.

He gets started, still thinking about the wine. It has been a little fruity, a little sweet—but good, all in all, damn it. What a shame. The first sip had reminded him of...

There are shouts. He can see the park up ahead, at the end of the street he is on and then across a wide boulevard. The pick-up spot, by those oak-like trees, is in sight.

As are two separate groups of guards, both of them on the run toward him, shouting at him to halt. He'll have to

He feels a punch in his left calf, and looks down to see a throwing knife pull loose and drop to the ground. Blood spurts from the calf. Great. He takes two more steps and finds the leg giving out.



hustle.

Damn, he can see it is going to be uncomfortably close. He keys her in again.

"Mother, things are going to get a little sticky here real soon. Can you hurry it up at all?"

"Doing my best, Ted," she replies. There is a moment's hesitation. "I should add that you're running low on the juice, too, Ted. I thought I should warn you. Just hang in there for a few more minutes."

"Right," he says, but he doesn't like how things are going. The group from the right is drawing those blades out as he runs across the boulevard. The thin sunlight of a Crael winter reflects off one as the guard raises and throws it, through he is impossibly far away. Incredibly, it comes within ten to fifteen meters. Too damn close.

The other group is coming up on him from behind. Ted needs to angle to the left and around a low wall to avoid the first group, and that gives the second a chance to get close. Too close, damn it, too close.

How come it always comes down to this? How come they almost get him every

time? Why can't just one of these assignments work out smoothly the way things are supposed to? Hell, he'll never make journeyman at this rate. They'll kick him out of the guild. He'll wind up back on Earth, working on some corporate grain farm, driving a damn...

He feels a punch in his left calf, and looks down to see a throwing knife pull loose and drop to the ground. Blood spurts from the calf. Great. He takes two more steps and finds the leg giving out.

"Mother," he says, aloud this time.

"Almost there. A few more seconds," he seems to hear from the distance. There is a growing sense of despair—the juice is giving out completely.

"Mother," he says again, and realizes he is crawling now, trying for the clump of orange-hued bushes that grow at the base of the trees.

A blade tears through the bush directly in front of him and thuds into the nearest tree. He can see his own reflection in the blade, all hazy and indistrict, an elongated sad clown face a very long way from home.

He hears a distant scream, and smiles

to recognize the sound. It grows louder quickly, intensifying in a few seconds from barely audible to overwhelming to all-encompassing in sound and volume and love for Mother and her salvation and her power over him as he lays there, submissive, waiting for her to scream in with her totality, her safe haven.

It is a blessed, sudden womb of calm, this sort of rescue. Stasis, darkness that he revels in for the mother love that it brings him. Safety, stasis, dark. In that last second before she throws the stasis field over the park and lifts him out, he thinks of how he loves her, needs her. Mother, his rescuer. He loves her.

II

He hates Mother.

That is always his first thought when he comes to. He hates her, his all-comforting, all-sympathetic, all-controlling ship. He hates her, and himself, and what he has become.

And his head hurts, as it always does when he comes down off the juice.

There is the throbbing behind the eyes, the ache at the base of the neck, the dry mouth, the dry damn soul. He tries to swallow, but can't.

He stands up from his bed, staggers slightly, still dizzy and nauseous from his the entry into stasis and the emergence from it. He hates waking up wrung out like this after hours full of the stuff, hours of riding high on another assignment before tumbling down into this damn abyss. He allows himself to wallow in the passionate self-pity of his helpless fury.

But only for a moment.

Then, walking stiffly from the pain in his left calf where the wound is nearly done force-healing, he stumbles over to the galley nook where the gel sits waiting for him.

Awful stuff, this gel, quivering on the countertop, milky white. It is meant to replenish all that the juice has wrung dry

from him as his body has burned through its hours of action, his metabolism screaming and kicking all the way. This is how he thinks of it, of himself. It is a long scream and a slight, fetal kick.

He is, he realizes for the hundredth time, no better off than the little square of nutrients and electrolytes and God knows what else. He taps it with his finger and it shakes, as if afraid of him. He laughs.

Poor thing. He leans over and sucks up the gel in one mouthful, mashing it down inside his mouth and then swallowing. No reason not to. He chuckles at the act for a moment. It does re-establish a sort of

control over events. It is something he can do successfully. This, at least, he is capable of.

But then he feels a warning twinge in his stomach and runs for the toilet nook. There he kneels, drops his head, feels it coming in convulsive waves, and vomits.

He stands up from the bowl after a few minutes, shaking with the effort after it has run to dry heaves. He does not give Mother the pleasure of

asking for a drone to help him, but instead, shakily, walks toward the sliding door and to the sink area.

He has thought of an adequate response to all this, a solution that, in the end, solves more problems than it creates.

Carefully, avoiding unnecessary haste that might alert her, he draws back and shuts the sliding door. That gives him a slight measure of privacy. It is misleading, he knows; Mother monitors all his actions all the time. But a small sense of privacy, an extra few moments for the drones to react, might be all he needs.

He searches under the sink with groping hands; finds the glass cutter he's hidden there weeks before during drydock. Mother, unconscious during the workover, cannot have known the cutter is there. It is a simple little device, no electronics at all, undetectable in the pipes under the wash basin. The perfect tool.

He draws the edge slowly over the wrists, bringing it across and slightly down, seeing it cross the blood vessels as they stand out now in this supreme moment.



There is no other way, he thinks, consoling himself for his actions. Too many lives. Too many lives and no control, no damn control at all.

Slowly, staring at the round blade for

a moment, fixated by its shine, he brings the glass cutter up to eye level and sees himself in it, the drawn face widening in despair. He smiles thinly and it smiles back. That is good. The suicidal clown.



He laughs, a guttural chuckle, and brings the cutter down towards his chest.

"Teddy?" Mother queries over the speakers, avoiding the comlink. He stops.

"Yes, Mother?"

"Teddy, where did you get that?"

"At Weapons, during drydock, when I was off the juice for almost a month. You remember?"

"I remember, Teddy. What do you plan to do with it?"

He knows what is coming from here, will have nothing to do with it, her cajoling, her hopeful tone, her trickery. Not now, not ever again.

"Mother," he says softly, leaning forward to place both hands against the sink and taking a deep breath, "Mother, I think it's time, don't you?" And he stands straight, shoulders back.

He brings the cutter to eye level, the right hand holding the round edge over

HE WONDERS, AS HE CUTS HIS WAY

the left wrist. The throat would be quicker, he thinks, but he cannot bring himself to do that. No, the wrists.

He draws the edge slowly over the wrists, bringing it across and slightly down, seeing it cross the blood vessels as they stand out now in this supreme moment.

They move with his pumping heart, pulsing in time to the thump-thump that sent them jumping against the bone of his too-thin wrist.

He turns the blade's angle so that it comes sharply down along the bluish line. He presses. A white line opens down the wrist, slowly turns red as he watches. It does not spurt. There is no pain.

He takes another, bolder, stroke.

The second cut, much harder, dizzies him, and the blood shoots out in a quick splash. Now there is pain, a sharp demand that grows quickly in volume from a single point of anger to a great roaring in his head, as much from the emotion of the act as the real sensation. Ignoring the dizziness, he tries to switch hands to cut the other wrist, but, oddly, he thinks, he finds his left hand does not work well at all. It cannot hold the cutter, which drops and clatters on the floor. Then, not realizing why the left hand has proven so disappointing, he blacks out.

Mother watches patiently as her drones break quickly through the sliding door, walk easily over the broken shards of the door's glass to reach her Teddy. In two minutes they have the wrists sealed and in a freezemold and Teddy into medcot.

There, with him calm and peaceful in his chemical slumber, she turns her attention to their superiors on S'hudon, dispatching the tach-runner with an explanation of how the assignment has gone wrong, and of how it will be fixed.

Or, As Teddy is the first from Earth to become an agent; it is important to his home world that he succeed. All that Mother seeks to do is help him, guide him, lead him through these difficult years of transition from naive colonial boy to veteran journeyman.

He will make a fine agent one day. She is sure of it. He shows such promise.

Carefully, aware of his body's chaotic chemistry just now, she alters the mix of juice, increases the mood enhancers,

lightens the caution factors. Teddy needs courage and confidence this time. Better to be foolish than to fail. She accepts the risk for him that the decision entails, and starts the feed.



Ted scales the outside wall of the palace infirmary without being detected. He operates without a personal defense screen to avoid its slight glow in the moonless light. It won't stop the Crael blades anyway.

He isn't worried about the lack of a screen, nor the risk associated with trying to reach the emperor so soon after the first attempt. It is a challenge. He keys in Mother.

"How am I doing?" he asks, giggling a bit with the excitement of it as he edges along. He'll get the fat, pompous little ruler this time, he is sure of it.

"Fine, Ted," Mother responds in his ear. "The window is five meters away. You should be able to see it now. Good luck. I'll scoop down and make the pickup from the fountain in the courtyard after you do the job. You have ten minutes from now to complete the assignment and get to the fountain."

"No problem," he said, stifling another giggle. Too much juice, he thinks, and takes a steadying deep breath. Slow, slow now. A cautious step, another, a delicate move around a stone support pillar and then he is there.

Carefully, he leans to his right and looks in. A bulky form is lying on the bed. He can see that it is turned away from the window. Perfect.

He wonders, as he cuts his way through the window glass with the silent sharpness of the cutter, what he would ever do without Mother, without the juice. God, it feels good. It all feels so good. He loves working with her. What a team they make. He loves the challenge of this work, the importance of it, the need for it. He loves being an agent. He loves Mother.

This time, he is confident, the murder will be quick and easy and perfect.



BONUS PIN-UP

As a special BONUS to you the readers of the Premiere edition of *OFFWORLD*. We've included this beautifully rendered image of a mysterious NOMAD. This painting possibly set in the past, present or near future has been illustrated by TONY WILLIAMS. Look for more of Tony's art as he illustrates one of the stories in this magazine; *THE TOLL*, written by ORÍANA WHITNEY DAMASCUS which presents one possible vision of the future.

Tony uses a mixed media approach to all his illustrations. Combining acrylic and oil paint, color and graphite pencils. He also, as the illustrations done for *THE TOLL* can attest is a fantastic black and white illustrator.

Along with being an illustrator, Tony is also the CREATIVE CONSULTANT to *OFFWORLD*. Which basically means he helped put together the entire magazine.

Finally, as the magazine you are holding in your hands went to press. Tony married the very lovely Theda. All we can say is that we congratulate Tony and Theda on their Wedding day. Good luck.

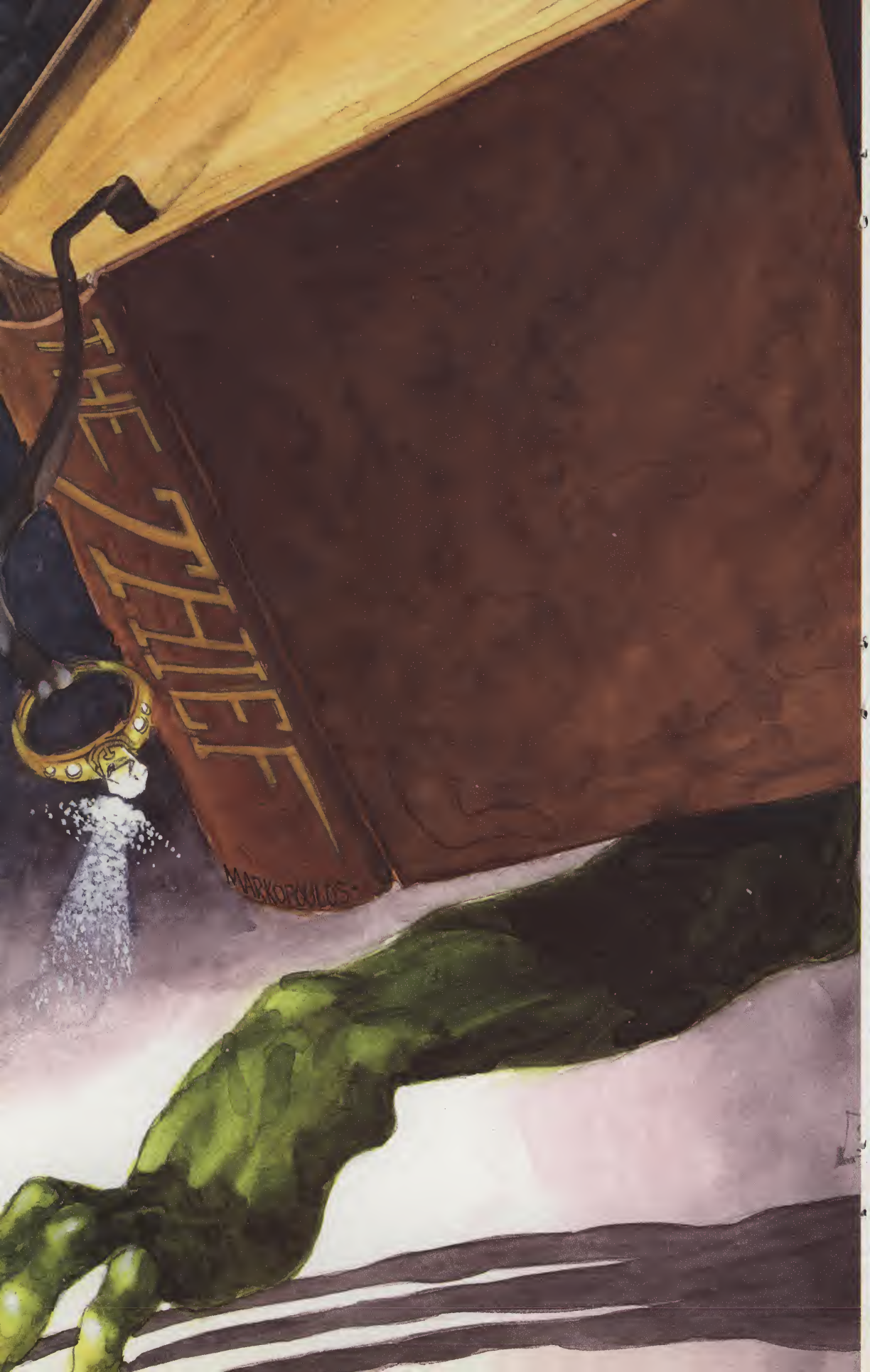
Now that the Wedding and honeymoon is over. I have just one thing to say to Tony...get to work.

(a joke).



N O M A D

ART BY: TONY WILLIAMS



MARKOPOLIS

THE THIEF

By MICHAEL MARKOPOULOS Illustrations by NATHAN MASSENGILL

A speeding pickup. A driver in a hurry. The old man labored to the curb. A wrinkled suit draped his bony shoulders. A gold-tipped cane, sturdier than his twisted legs, provided the only support. Squinting through thick bifocals, he looked first up the street and then down, unsure of himself. The light blinked, changing color. He impulsively charged into the street, hobbling forward bravely. Suddenly the truck came screeching around the corner, horn blaring. The old man froze, then felt a strong hand pull backwards.

"Look out, old fella!" boomed the voice.

The old man trembled. He turned and looked blankly at the stranger who saved him. "Oh my..."

"You all right, old-timer?"

"Uh...yes. Yes, I think so."

"Want me to call you a cab? Maybe you shouldn't be walking alone?"

"Uh...no. No, I'm fine." The old man had forgotten his money.

"You sure?"

"Oh. Yes, I'll be more careful. Thank you. Thank you very much."

The stranger had better things to do than diddle with this old fossil. He figured

he'd he done his bit for one day. "Okay, Pops. Hey, the light's green now."

"Oh yes, yes, of course. Thank you."

"No sweat."

The old man, perspiring, wobbled into the street, pedestrians flowing by. Reaching the opposite curb, he zagged his way up the main boulevard past stylish boutiques and thriving businesses—a world he had left behind years ago.

"Extra! Extra! Read all about it," hawked a newsboy. "Spider Thief Robs Penthouse."

The old man shook his head. What's the world coming to? He squinted at the headline, bringing his nose right up to the

newspaper.

Last night, the Spider Thief struck once again, this time in a private downtown penthouse.

"Two bits, buster," yelled the youthful voice into his ear. The old man jumped, started.

"Oh, yes. Certainly."

He dug into empty pants pockets with arthritic fingers.

"No loitering around papers and magazines, mister," the boy decreed impatiently.

The old man moved onward, shaken for the second time that day. "Time to get home," he said to himself.

Inching his way along several streets, each more exclusive than the one before, he finally arrived at a sleek glass-and-concrete monolith. Tottering, he worked his way up the steps one at a time arriving at the ultra-modern, ultrachic entrance.

"Good afternoon, sir," said the smiling doorman, opening the heavy portal with a gloved hand.

"Have you heard about the Sp...Spider Thief?" the old man asked frantically.

"Yes, sir. We're keeping an eye out for him, sir," the doorman exclaimed proudly and with no authority.

"Good. Good," said the old man without a thank-you and without being convinced. He glanced up and down the street nervously before going inside. Stumbling across the lobby to the elevators, he quickly pressed the "up" button. A middle-aged man in an expensive suit and a heavy five o'clock shadow strolled into the lobby, and also walked to the elevators. He leaned to press the button, saw the light already lit, and, chagrined, pulled his hand back. He looked down at the old man.

"Hello," he jeered.

The old man looked up into the cold eyes and at the evil grin. He saw the teeth

were long sharp fangs. It appeared that the man was staring at his expensive watch. The old man smiled feebly and backed away, trembling once more. He was about to call the doorman when the elevator announced its arrival.

Ding.

"After you," snarled the stranger.

The old man was swept along, helpless. He was sucked into the elevator by fate, the horrid stranger stalking behind. He closed his eyes awaiting the blow and jumped as the elevator door slammed shut. Heartbeats exploded in his ears. He shuddered. They stood there

together, indefinitely suspended. Then from a source of courage he never knew he had, the old man raised a quavering finger and pressed a button. Five. He peered up at the menace beside him. Long pointed ears extended from the hairy face of the brute. The teeth had grown longer and sharper, saliva dripping. The creature kept staring at him, a demonic sneer on its face. The elevator jerked upward. The beast was going to follow him right up to his

He peered up at the menace beside him.

Long pointed ears extended from the hairy face of the brute. The teeth had grown longer and sharper, saliva dripping.

floor! The old man prayed, quaking. This couldn't be true. He pitied himself, regretting his entire life, when miraculously, the thing stabbed a button on the board. Four. Was this a cruel trick? The old man huddled against the back wall. Slowly, excruciatingly, the elevator inched up. Two...Three...This was going to be it, the reckoning. The elevator ground to a bumpy halt. The creature grew larger, sprouting oozing scales. The old man's heart skidded to a stop. The slimy monster hesitated. Hovered. Turned away—and slowly slithered out.

"Good afternoon," it hissed.

The doors closed in slow motion. The elevator groaned upward. The old man was a shambles, not sure whether he had experienced reality or imagination. He felt the cage shake and stop. "Five," it moaned. The maw opened into the hallway, beckoning. He floundered out,



breathless, almost losing his cane. He staggered down the hall, casting glances about him.

Crashing into a carved wooden door, he fumbled once again, this time in his breast pocket. Panic hit him. The keys. He heard a jingling. There they were. He jammed one into the lock. It wouldn't go. He felt faint. Take it easy, he told himself. The key turned; the door opened. He flew inside and slammed the door. Locking several bolts, he leaned back against the door, breathing rapidly, trying to gain control of his heart and lungs. Slowly the pounding eased; the sweat began to evaporate. "I made it," he rejoiced.

Sotar sat on the shelf in plain sight, unnoticed. He was jarred awake. The front door had slammed and the young woman entered in a flurry. Her heels, clicking on the marble entry, changed to muffled thumps on the thick carpet. The silver fox flew into the lounge chair. Sotar waited for the next move. Yes. To the custom alarm system. Very fancy. The box counted down from sixty.

Nineteen...Eighteen... Seventeen...She punched D-O-L-L-A-R. The red light blinked out. Three sets of electric beams snapped off. Of course, thought Sotar, the same letters as on the sleek car downstairs. The vain wench. She spun around and faced Sotar. The moment held. Indifferent eyes swept past him. Sotar chuckled to himself. She sighed, kicked off her Guccis, and plopped on the couch. Sotar zoomed in on the prize. The lamp light hit it, spraying a thousand tiny rainbows on the ceiling.

Three carats. Maybe more.

The woman sighed once again and, with a rush, jumped off the couch. Hair flying, she paced in uncertainty. Then she reached a decision. Noticeably calmer, she sauntered to the bar and poured a scotch and water.

A quiet evening at home? That's okay, thought Sotar, I'm patient.

Casually flicking on the stereo, the woman glided into the bedroom. A mellow rhythm filled the room. Sotar surveyed the residence. Expensive furniture, reflecting in chrome and black, contrasted tastefully with the begonias

and philodendrons. Plush couches and chairs sat on a heavy shag carpet. The silky curtains were drawn back revealing a night time panorama of the city below.

Everything a jetsetting lady could want.

The music changed pace and the woman bouncingly returned half-dressed, robe in hand. A favorite song? Ah—the ring was off. She hadn't been gone very long, certainly not enough time to lock the ring in a safe. Sotar smiled inwardly.

Slowly she undressed. The woman squirmed out of her tight dress revealing long sensuous arms and legs. Next the slip fell away. She unwittingly faced Sotar and began to struggle with her bra strap. This took an inordinate amount of time, almost a tease. The bra came loose. She turned profile for a moment, tilting her head toward the music, curls of hair tumbling to the shoulders. Sotar observed her silhouetted against a lamp. Sotar held his breath, his heart pounding. How ugly these humans were. He relaxed when the woman donned her robe.

Turning toward the shelf, she ran her eyes across and above Sotar. Then she came down to Sotar's level, darting her vision toward his right. The close-up face inched nearer. Sotar could smell the makeup and the lipstick. He tensed.

"Now where did you come from?" she talked to him. "War and Peace, huh?"

She picked Sotar off the bookshelf and leafed through his pages. No doubt she wondered how the novel was left by her apartment door that morning, Sotar thought smugly. He was ecstatic. The stupid human fools. This was his favorite disguise. It's a good thing I went to the library—I'm unabridged, Sotar laughed to himself.

As a plasma engineer, he could control his molecular structure just by thought. All of his species had this power, but Sotar was the best. Leaving himself on doorsteps as a book allowed easy access to all

dwellings, no matter how tight the security. This idea displaced his first plan of being a watermelon. The density change would be easier, but watermelons could be eaten.

The woman plunked down with Sotar. She began with page one. He gave her credit. She was the first to actually read the book. Sotar reveled in his successful ruse, through it wasn't as easy as it used to be. He relaxed and became totally passive. It was going to be a long night. How about a little snooze?

Sotar drifted off, admiring his own unique talents. He could adjust his density level, as well as his shape. Therefore, as a book, he was not heavy. Density change took about ten minutes. All his organs and internal biochemistry were drastically rearranged but still functioned properly.

The undetectable electrical impulses and chemical reactions simply took different paths.

Sotar dreamt of life on his home planet, and of the two ships. He was the only one he knew of who had definitely escaped the conflagration. His mind drifted through the nightmare of his long journey and the landing, years ago, in a solo vessel.

Sotar observed her, silhouetted against a lamp. Sotar held his breath, his heart pounding. How ugly these humans were. He relaxed when the woman donned her robe.

Earth! Aching. Alive. He lay in the woods naked, thrown from the badly shattered ship. No broken bony structures. No ruptured organs. He painfully got up, sore and aching. Slowly he worked out the stiffness. Suddenly, he heard a noise ahead, and scampered under a bush. The natives came walking in his direction. So that's what they look like? Tall, upright, strong. Sotar knew they breathed oxygen as he did, but this form? He studied the arms, legs, head. Very intriguing. Very noble. He must copy this shape exactly. One spoke—a strange sound. Sotar practiced it in his mind for later use. They didn't notice him. After they passed, he stood up. The molecules rushed into shape. Up...tall, taller...head budding...appendages growing. Sotar's



mind spun, exhilarated, proud. There. A native of Earth. A faultless copy. Now the next problem—food. He was famished. Traveling through the trees, he spied a clearing. Several smaller animals were feeding on some edibles. Perhaps he could

scare them off. He broke into the campground growling as he had just learned. The campers scattered, screaming, running from the bear. Sotar lumbered up to the picnic table and shoveled the sandwiches into his mouth.

"Joe. Try to scare him off."

Several blasts from the shotgun sent Sotar retreating into the bushes. Sometimes you learn the hard way.

The woman nodded off; Sotar fell to the floor, jolted awake. Oh no, he thought, I hope I won't stay here all night. A sudden noise exploded in the calm apartment. The telephone. The woman started, got up automatically, and walked to the bar.

"Hello."

A chatter on the other end.

"Hi, Margo."

More chatter.

"I'd love to. I'm dreadfully bored."

Chat. Chat. Chat.

"Ten minutes? The usual place? Fine."

The woman dashed into the bedroom. Within five minutes she hurried out in a casual but expensive suit. Hitting the alarm button, she was gone. Electric beams zapped across the room. Sotar was alone.

He hadn't missed the obvious. Her ring finger was naked. Time to transform himself. In his present dense state, he was paralyzed by the tightly wound molecules. He felt the bonds loosen, slower than usual, more painful than ever. This must soon end. He must go home. A few more robberies. A little more money. And then, new parts for the ship—and freedom. After fifteen minutes he returned to his quick capabilities. Sotar had assumed his natural form. Of course he could never allow a human to see his real self. Secrecy provided backup to disguise.

His native senses allowed him to track the electric beams. One fanned across the living room. There—a pet corridor. He crept under the beam to the control box. D...O...L...L...A...R. Poof. Beams gone. Sotar went into the bedroom. The lights were out, but no matter—there it glowed, catching the light from the living room. Sotar snatched the ring up and strode out to a lamp. He peered at the stone with his

sensitive eyes, mind ticking out the statistics. Carat weight? An estimate—three point one. Color? My, m—E. Clarity? He squinted closer, impressed. VS1, possible VVS2. A compact fortune.

Sotar put the ring down and stood in thought. Let's see now. How about a disguise? Yes, perfect. The molecules raced across his frame. Transforming without density change was easier. He shifted like a living blur, colors changing. The alien form retreated and a head, arms, and legs appeared. The mass gelled. Familiar human attributes became visible. The general form became plump. Wisps of hair encircled a bald spot. Jolly blue eyes

formed the hub of well-used crow's feet. Clothing congealed from rudimentary skin—a gray uniform. Hammers, screw-drivers and keys dangled from a heavy utility belt. Sotar, a big grin on his chubby face, was totally immersed in the character as usual. He dropped the prize into his breast pocket and walked out of the apartment, smiling.

"Hi, Mr. Higgins," said a tenant in the lobby to the whistling man. "How's the repair business?"

"Never better," Higgins replied hastening out the door, tools clinking. "I really fixed somebody today."

The old man tumbled into his suite after another adventure. "That wretched newsboy!" He clutched a paper. "This generation's got no respect."

He calmed himself, feeling secure in his spacious quarters. They were very comfortable—and expensive. He limped to the center of the room, supported by his gold-handled cane, and stared up at his collection.

"Ahhhh..." he marveled.

Lining the walls were rows of books. Classics, antiques, collector's items. They were his companions and his primary joy. Well, almost his primary joy. He looked down at the newspaper...and shuddered.

He shifted like a living blur, colors changing.

The alien form retreated and a head, arms, and leg appeared. The mass gell. Familiar human attributes became visible.

SPIDER THIEF STRIKES AGAIN

Panic clutched him. He quickly examined the room. No signs of an intruder. He backed up to the bookcase. Sticking his tongue out to the side in concentration, he blinked up through his bifocals. Ah, yes. An untitled volume sat on a shelf nondescriptly. Looking carefully over his shoulder, he pulled it out, held it flat, and *pop*. The front cover sprang open. His sour face brightened, large soft wrinkles rippling across it. Ah, yes. He looked down on a sea of glistening facets. Diamonds, of all sizes. Years of saving. He gaped happily, like a buccaneer unearthing a treasure. Breaking the small clear plane of diamonds were lesser splashes of red, green and blue gems. The rich old man laughed freely, an image of younger, more confident days. Reversing the entire process carefully, he made sure the special book was lined up even with the others. Finally relaxing, he picked up the paper once more—and read the second headline.

HEIRESS ARRIVES TODAY

The countess everybody's been talking about, he recalled—that crazy one on the talk shows. Probably here in town for a spending orgy, he thought, disgusted.

Countess Andriana arrives today in town today for the Annual Ambassadors' Ball. She will be showing off her new Jubilee Diamond, reputed to be over fifteen carats and of the highest quality. The gem, mounted in a choker, was purchased at a price as yet unrevealed by the countess. The countess will be staying at the posh Excelsior Hotel. Tight security will be maintained during the entire visit, due to the recent robberies attributed to the so-called Spider Thief...

The old man was glad his possessions were not publicized for everyone to know. He reared his head and laughed wildly.

Sotar sat on the shelf in plain sight, unnoticed. He had learned much about the countess in these few hours. The first was that she was an idiot. She snatched up the trashy novel in a wink, as he had predicted. The second was about her purported wealth. All the trappings of affluence were there of course—chauffeurs, ladies-in-waiting, security guards and, of course, the furs and jewelry. The choker had not yet made its appearance. But something was just wrong.

Sotar watched Andriana sweep about the penthouse in a frenzy, her ladies frantically catering to her tantrums. She wore a dazzling low cut gown, her hair exquisitely sculptured.

"Priscilla, how is my hair?"

"Perfect, Madam."

"And my make-up?"

"Flawless, Lady."

Andriana ignored her, fussing in front of a mirror. They were preparing for the arrival of her escorts. The countess then left the room and Sotar's sharp ears heard the distinct tap and whirl. A safe. Andriana returned with an object in her hand. The choker. This would be his final triumph. His life had grown too stressful, the shape changes too exhausting. He would soon return home.

"Oh, it's magnificent, Lady," swooned a new girl.

"Yes, quite." Andriana gave her a cutting look.

One of the ladies helped latch the Jubilee around the heiress' neck, blocking Sotar's view. Then the Countess turned around. The diamond was enormous. Sotar hoped she would come closer so he could examine it, but the doorbell rang.

"Quickly, quickly, places everyone," shouted the Countess.

"Oh Lady, this is so exciting," said the new girl.

"Quiet, stupid," came the response from Andriana. "Where did you get this one?" she asked Priscilla.

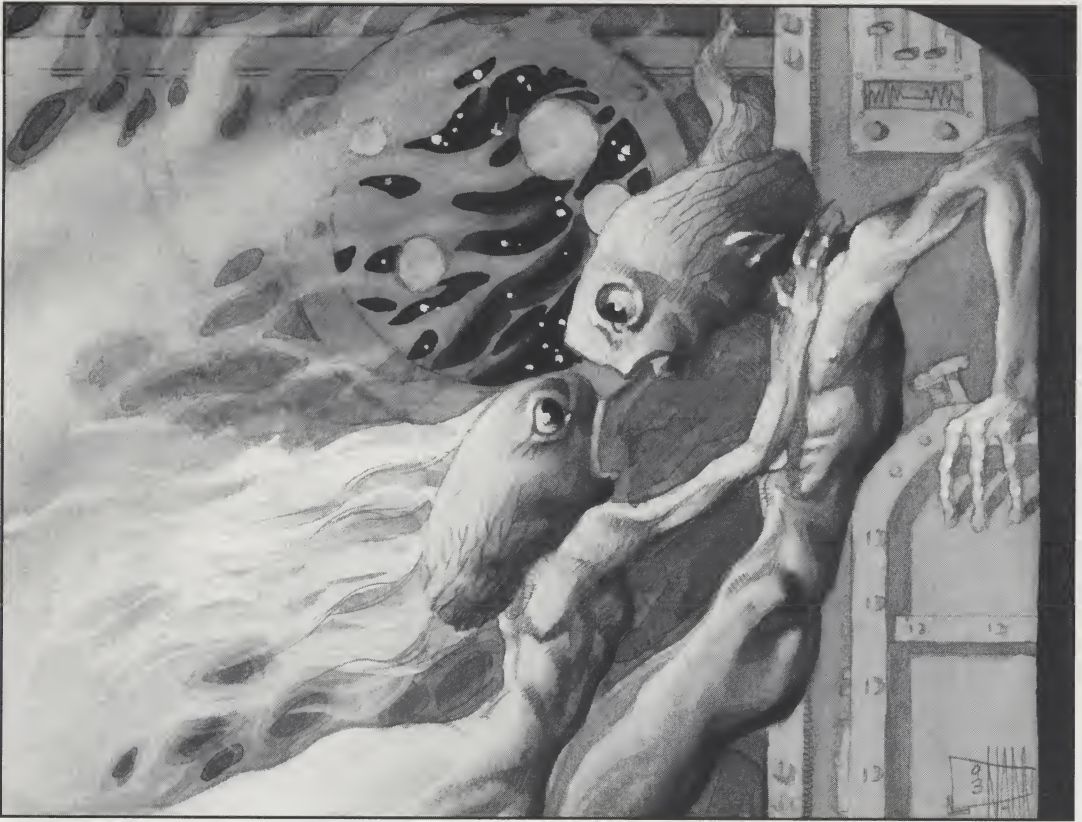
Priscilla lowered her eyes, lowered her gaze. The new girl held back tears.

"Never mind. You."

"Maria, Madam."

"Whatever. Get the door."

There was a flutter of activity and the



escort party gushed in—four finely dressed men. Sotar recognized them from the newspaper accounts. There was the long-winded ambassador and the dethroned prince; the has-been olympic medalist and Andriana's official escort, the corpulent senator. A butler served champagne.

"My dear. My dear. How wonderful to see you again," wheezed the ambassador.

The countess was very gracious, almost coy. She curtsied.

"Thank you, Mr. Ambassador," the sugar flowed.

"My, my. Look at this treasure." He examined the diamond. The new girl sighed. Andriana nailed her to the wall with a sidelong look. "It's fantastic," he murmured.

The introductions continued. Each man praised the lady and the gem.

"And finally, Countess, let me introduce your escort."

"Of course," Andriana purred, cutting him off. "Welcome, Senator."

She held out a delicate hand, tilted down demurely to be kissed.

"My pleasure," croaked the fat man bending over.

"And what do you think of the Jubilee?" asked the ambassador.

The senator looked directly at the countess' breasts.

"Magnificent."

"A toast," slurred the drunk prince, his mustache unevenly clipped.

"Yes indeed. A toast," they echoed.

Andriana walked up to Sotar, diamond sparkling, then spun around to face her admirers. Sotar pouted to himself.

"To a most beautiful lady."

"Hear, hear!"

"Hear, hear!"

After the toast, they pranced off to the ball, abandoning the suite. It was time to check out the suite. And the safe—for perhaps later tonight Her Highness will hide the diamond there, and tomorrow when she goes out...

Sotar felt his molecules swell and his body expand. He slid off the shelf and bounced on the floor. Ouch. He could travel light years but not five feet. His true shape emerged over the minutes, slowly and painfully. Much moreso than ever. Changing density was the most difficult part. Transformations between disguises of

the same size were much easier—and faster. The press gave him too much credit. "Spider Thief" indeed. In that case he'd already have crawled into Fort Knox. He got up aching.

Eyes sweeping the room, he saw no evidence of an alarm. He stiffly walked into the bedroom. Where was the safe? Simpletons, he sneered. It was behind the picture. Removing the painting and placing it down gingerly, he methodically worked on the safe's combination. The tumblers fell; the safe swung open. Empty—except for a box. He lifted; the lid anxiously. Papers, just papers, he grunted in frustration. And IOUs at that. The shock continued. Not IOUs. Copies of IOUs. From the countess to various creditors—for huge amounts. The frivolous imposter. Replacing the box, he slammed the door shut and slapped the picture back on the wall. He was tired of this. The last few months had been more stressful—and he was even feeling guilty.

Then he heard the telltale click. A pressure plate on the floor, an alarm. Instantly a distant ringing echoed. The guard would be rushing up. He had to get out. No time to shrink back to book size. Sotar dashed out of the bedroom, molecules swirling. Stopping at the door, he felt head and limbs forming. The alarm was louder from here. Sotar had never transformed so quickly. Pain jarred his body; nausea welled. He eliminated the unessentials. No kneecaps...or toes...or genitals. There, almost ready. Oh no, he had forgotten clothes. He could hear the guard pounding up the stairs. An old suit took shape. A thick pair of glasses. Out the door. A cane with a golden handle grew out of his hand. The old man limped by the stairwell as the door burst open.

"What's going on?" demanded a puffing guard.

"Well, I...I don't know."

The guard quickly scrutinized the oldster. Apparently satisfied, he rushed to the suite. Several more guards arrived. After initially finding everything secure

inside, they rechecked the hallway. The corridor was empty except for the old man waiting patiently at the elevator. As it arrived, Sotar smiled at the guards innocently. Tipping his hat, he disappeared through the elevator doors.

Sotar clattered down the street, genuinely shaken. This was his closest call. The personality of the old man doubled his anxiety. Sotar was losing control. He had actually started living his characters, taking on their attributes. It was a terrible stress. He had almost gotten hit by a truck last week. No more characters from late night movies, he told himself.

He limped past the newsstand. The boy stared at him contemptuously. Sotar wanted to hit him with the cane. That was his own self coming through. Control yourself, he admonished. His shaped unfocused slightly. Concentrate.

Sotar arrived at his building. Ignoring the doorman, he staggered in and up to the elevator. No imaginary monsters this time, but the old man barely hung on; Sotar could hardly keep the image. In the elevator he began to flicker. Pain and exhaustion pounded him. Even the upward acceleration of the elevator tore at his molecules. A half man, half alien being blundered into the empty hallway. Bursting into his apartment, he fell to the couch, exhausted, complete in his true form. I will get that diamond, I swear I will. Deep slumber enveloped him. Home. Back home.

"Come with me, Lolari. We can escape!" He screamed.

"No, Sotar!" Lolari was hysterical.

"But the ship is ready!"

"No! No! We must die. The High Priest has decreed it." She fell to the ground sobbing, Sotar gripping her.

"Come on, Lolari," he begged amidst the deafening crackle.

"We are evil," she moaned. "Evil."

"Lolari, the fires have begun."

"Good!"

In the elevator he began to flicker. Pain and exhaustion pounded him. Even the upward acceleration of the elevator tore at his molecules.

"Mitar has the only other ship. He will escape."

"They will shoot him down!"

"No!"

"Then go with him!" she spat.

The heat became more intense by the minute.

"We are not evil, Lolari."

"Yes, we are!" she yelled over the roar. "We're out of food. No more resources on the whole planet," her speech was pressed, frantic, desperate. "Neighbor stealing from neighbor, mothers from children. Disguises. Lies. Shapetransfers."

Sotar tugged at her. "Come on!"

Her hysteria mounted.

"You don't even know your own family!" She broke from his grasp, glaring at him. "I don't even know if you're Sotar!"

She ran into the blaze screaming. "You will burn too, Sotar. You will burn too."

She was consumed.

Sotar stood shocked, disbelieving.

"I am not evil," he muttered.

Flames exploded, knocking him down, snapping him back to reality. He jumped up and ran to the laboratory. The ship was ready. He leaped in and hit the button. Nothing. The walls of the lab began to redden, buckle. Flames spurted through the doorway. Again he hit the button. Again nothing. Torrents of black smoke erupted into the room. Sotar choked, gasped. He slammed the control panel frantically. A blast jolted him and he was flattened by the rapid acceleration. Painfully he glanced towards Mitar's house. He glimpsed the exhaust from another ship. Suddenly a missile erupted into view. An explosion. His own second stage had fired, knocking him unconscious.

Sotar tossed in his sleep, sweating, dreaming of Lolari. He jarred awake, the heater turned up full. He ached for Lolari. Face facts, she's dead. But Mitar? And his

family? He strained for the thousandth time, not remembering. Had he seen that other ship explode? He must find out. He must rebuild his ship. Fantasies of a decent life on Earth faded these last few months. He only needed that Jubilee diamond. It would pay for everything. They were not all destined to burn.

He will return to the penthouse tonight.

No one noticed the telephone repairman who entered the lobby of the Excelsior. Nobody cared when he went up the elevator. Finally, no one noticed his exhaustion.

"Excuse me," Sotar said to the guard at the door, "can you get this open?" He pointed to the utility closet across from the countess' door. "Wires in there."

The guard nodded. "I'll get the key." He left for the elevator.

As the elevator door closed, Sotar hurried to it, pulled out a wooden wedge from his toolbox, and drove it between the door and the floor, jamming the door. That should give him some time. He walked back to the utility closet and

opened the door effortlessly. Thieves have a way with basics—it wasn't locked. He slipped inside, hidden.

Now for the last density change. His mind grew hazy, sluggish. What was wrong? Excruciatingly, the molecules shrugged down; his shape shrank. The process halted, pain firing through him. Sotar's right side out-paced the left. An anguishing convulsion racked his frame. Down, down he went, tormented, slow. Concentrate, focus. He thought of Lolari. His home. Of escape. Thicker. Shooting cramps. Down, smaller. Piercing, throbbing agony.

He heard the elevator return, and *clunk*, heard the door get stuck. Almost ready. While still mobile he rolled out of the closet in a compact shape. The guard pounded at the door from inside the stalled elevator. Down, denser, pain, down. Done. The elevator door came ajar,

She ran from his grasp, glaring at him. "I don't even know if you're Sotar!" She ran into the blaze screaming "You will burn too, Sotar! You will burn, too!"

fingers prying. The wedge popped out and the door opened.

"What the...?" said the guard.

He stepped to the utility closet, seeing the open door.

"Huh? I guess he got in."

He noticed a book by the countess' door.

The Passions of Paulette

Opening the book, he read the inside the front cover:

To the Countess.

—An Admirer

The guard unlocked the door and threw the novel inside.

Sotar sat on the shelf, unnoticed and disgusted. On the couch below him panted the countess and her lover. The lights were turned down; the fireplace lit; the windows closed. The room smelled of cigarettes, liquor...and animals. Sotar choked.

"I love you."

"I love you too," said the countess.

Between the lovemaking and the fireplace, Sotar was suffocated. He was ill with a fever even though the room was chilly. Drifting into delirium, he dreamt of Lolari and the blaze. He fought to keep his shape. Reality blurred in and out.

"I love you."

"You will burn!"

Sotar tried to focus on the diamond around Andriana's neck. It blended into the crystal and champagne bottle, in his double vision. He sensed the flutter of loosening molecules.

Concentrate.

Were they making love again? Sotar smothered, gasped. He felt his bodily borders swimming around an internal oven. Focus. The gross bodies of the two humans were loathsome. The slim countess; the obese man, fat bouncing. The countess only wore the choker. Did she really enjoy this? Obviously so.

"I want you so much," the senator moaned.

"Yes, Darling, yes."

It went on forever. Sotar suffered. The temperature seemed to go up several more degrees; his fever increased. The bookshelf shook with their movements, further destabilizing him. Once again

there was a respite but the room grew stuffier, smokier.

"Will you invest in my gold mine, Darling?" oozed Andriana titillating her blubbery lover. Sotar supposed the female found him attractive.

"Yes, yes," he gasped. "But first I want to savor my reward. You."

The countess laughed with pleasure, or least appeared to. The senator kissed her neck.

"Let's get rid of this thing," he said.

"But you said it was kinky."

"I don't want to cut my lip."

The countess genuinely laughed. She allowed him to strip her of her last covering. He unhooked the latch and threw the choker on the shelf inches from Sotar. Sotar revived a bit. At last. He will enjoy this prize. As the lovers caressed below, his vision focused on the diamond. He was weak and drained. The surface of the gem reflected the fireplace. Sotar momentarily glimpsed a smiling Lolari.

"You will burn!" Molecules unwound. Control yourself. Concentrate. He tightened up. Sotar peered past the glistening surface into the depths of the stone. Prisms ricocheted, sparkling off multiple facets. Sotar's mind spun, stunned, uncomprehending. Glass crystals reflected back. A fake.

Sotar began to lose consciousness. He fought to stay focused. The room was humid and suffocating; he burned up. Still, he stubbornly held shape.

"Darling, it's chilly in here," shivered the countess, sweat evaporating on her body in the cold room.

"I'll turn up the heat," replied the senator.

His whale-like frame rippled gray adipose as he lumbered up. Sotar was nauseated by the cellulitic mounds. The senator squinted in the dark, at the thermostat.

"It must be broken," he said.

"Throw some wood on the fire, Sweetheart."

"There's no wood in here." His eyes fell on the bookshelf.

"Here, *the Passions of Paulette* will keep our fires burning."

They laughed together, warmed by the small sudden blaze.





THERE ARE NO DRAGONS

*There are no dragons (she said to me)
only fears and worlds of make believe -*

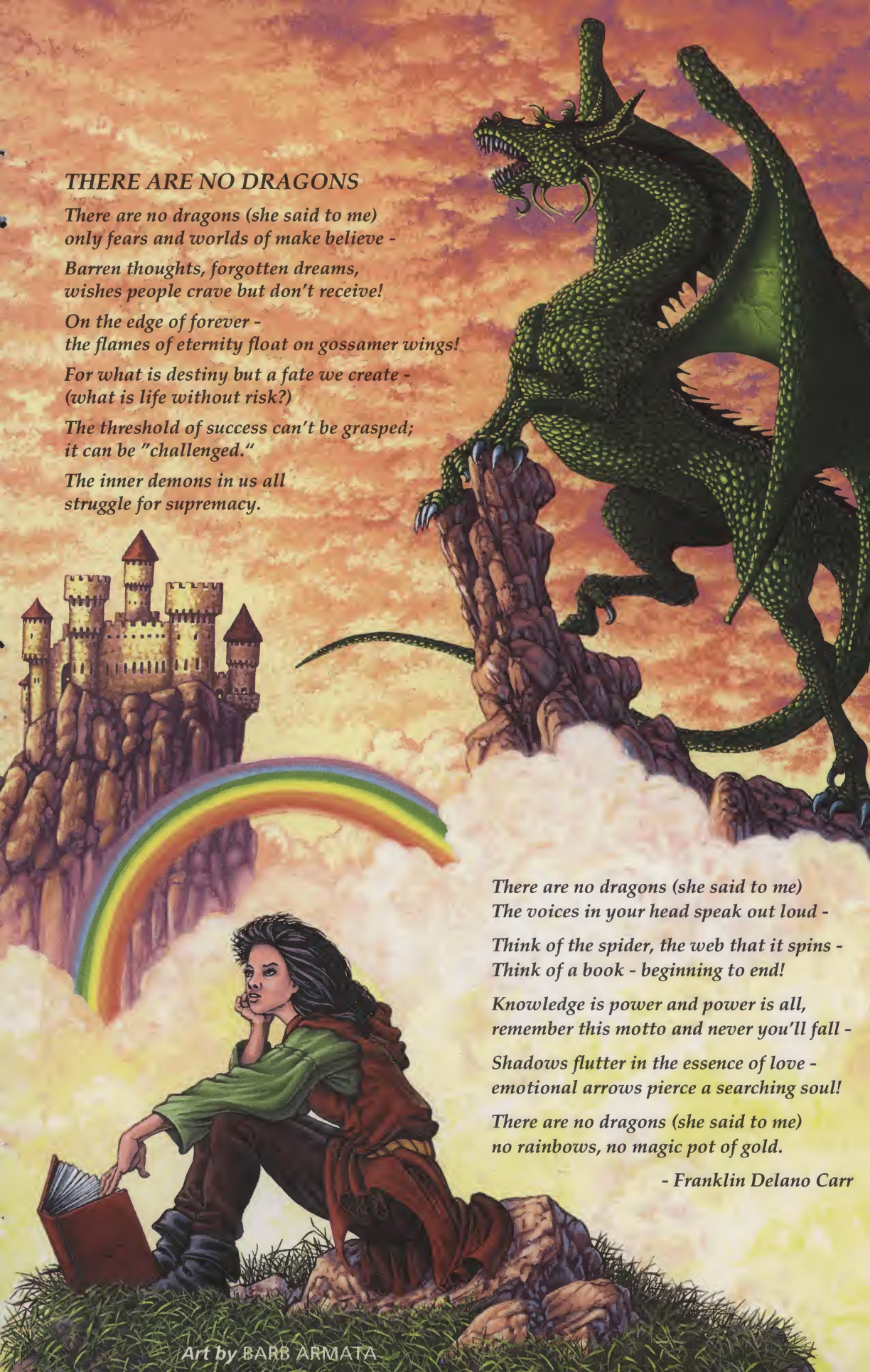
*Barren thoughts, forgotten dreams,
wishes people crave but don't receive!*

*On the edge of forever -
the flames of eternity float on gossamer wings!*

*For what is destiny but a fate we create -
(what is life without risk?)*

*The threshold of success can't be grasped;
it can be "challenged."*

*The inner demons in us all
struggle for supremacy.*



*There are no dragons (she said to me)
The voices in your head speak out loud -*

*Think of the spider, the web that it spins -
Think of a book - beginning to end!*

*Knowledge is power and power is all,
remember this motto and never you'll fall -*

*Shadows flutter in the essence of love -
emotional arrows pierce a searching soul!*

*There are no dragons (she said to me)
no rainbows, no magic pot of gold.*

- Franklin Delano Carr



THE TOLL

By ORIANA WHITNEY DAMASCUS *Illustrations by* TONY WILLIAMS

Whe mixture of coarse sand and gravel crunched under his booted feet, and with each step he counted out loud. "One thousand twenty-three, one thousand twenty four..." He came to a small dune and slid down on his heels, leaving furrows that were quickly filled in by tiny avalanches of sand and debris. When he reached bottom, he stood still for a moment, placed his cracked and calloused hands on his hips, and turned his dust-caked face towards the relentless sun. Then he screamed. He screamed long and loud, a scream muffled by sand and expanse that seared his parched throat and left him coughing thinly at its end. He licked at his fissured lips with a dry tongue and winced. It was like dragging sandpaper across an open wound.

He'd promised himself that he wouldn't count his steps anymore. Three times before he'd counted more than ten-thousand steps, ten thousand steps through nuclear desert and wasteland, ten thousand steps past ozone-blasted landscape and devastation, ten thousand steps past the corpses of people and animals mummified by the sun and heat. The only other person he'd seen alive was a dessicated human being that he thought may have been a woman. He noticed that she was counting her steps. When he tried to talk to her she screamed insanely at him and slashed at him weakly with a large

knife. "Don't stop me," she yelled at him. "I must keep counting! Just a few more steps..." And then she was gone, her tattered clothes flapping behind her like the wings of a dying bird. He started to follow her, but as she staggered away, he heard her begin counting again. "Three million, eight hundred and eleven thousand, six hundred forty-nine..." He shuddered. Soon after, he found himself counting his steps as well. At first he thought nothing of it, but then he remembered the woman and stopped. He stopped three times.

He looked off into the distance. The

horizon shivered and danced in the heat, but *it* was still there. It started out as a brilliant white speck against the maddening wind-blown greys and browns of the desert. He followed it as if *it* were a beacon, sometimes counting his steps as he did so. How long he walked towards *it*; how many days or weeks, he didn't know. He tried to count days once, but he forgot to count some days and just lost track. Days had proven impossible to count. Footsteps were easier. As he'd gotten closer, the *it* became a building. It was a tiny white building of some sort, in the middle of the desert, in the middle of what may have once been a city. Now it was an oddity, the building. So he walked towards it because there really was nothing else to do anyway. Absolutely nothing else to do.

Night was coming. The air was getting cold and the setting sun painted the sand the color of bruised blood. Now the remnants of the day's heat rose from the ruined earth in polluted waves, dissipating quickly in the gathering cold. Slowly, as he'd done so many times since the world's

destruction, he knelt and greedily licked the condensation from the nearby stones.

Morning arrived with the subtlety of a hammer striking an anvil. The bone-numbing cold was instantly replaced by searing heat. As always, he awoke to the *c-r-r-rumph* sound of rocks exploding from the sudden change in temperature. Groggily, he dug himself out of the shallow pit that served as his bed the night before. The sand was an adequate insulator and was, he'd found, the best way to conserve his body heat during the freezing nights. But he had to make sure he dug himself out in the morning, or he would cook like a pig buried in hot coals, literally. 'A painfully thin pig,' he thought wryly. 'Only I don't even get the benefit of an apple in my mouth.'

He stood up slowly, shedding hot sand in noisy sheets. He squinted towards the horizon. The little building was still there, "About two days away," he estimated. Then he started walking, and a short time after, he started counting.

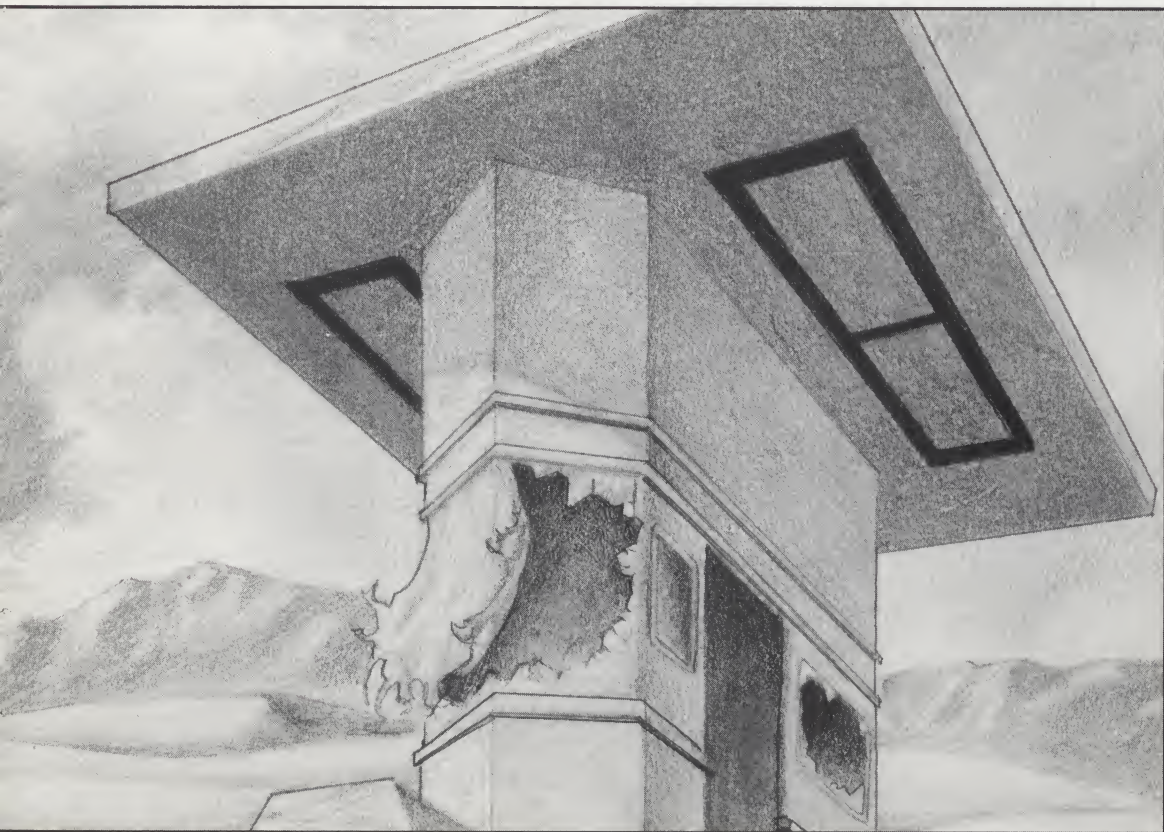
He'd miscalculated. It took him almost four days to reach his goal, and when he



was finally there, he had no idea what he should do next.

He stood there staring dumbly at the tiny white building. It wasn't a house, it was much too small. It seemed to be square, and much of it's front was made up of a large window that had shattered long ago. It gaped at him like the gum-filled smile of a senile old man, a drab curtain at one end fluttering, like a loose tooth in its socket. As he got closer, he could see that the brilliant white he'd been following was nothing more than a hastily done paint job, nearly scoured away in places by the wind and sand, revealing the pitted metal underneath. Spiny plants struggled to grow along the building's edges. A large cockroach crawled from beneath one of these plants and disappeared under the booth. He called it a booth because that is precisely what it was...a toll booth. He stifled a laugh, not noticing the lone tear that started to course it's way down his rough face, evaporating somewhere near the corner of his mouth. He brushed the dust from his pants, his movements becoming

harder and harder until he was pummeling his legs savagely. His legs buckled, and he fell to the ground. The world seemed to spin faster and faster under him; motes of color floated in the silvery sky before his swollen eyes. He didn't know what he'd expected to find, but he'd wanted it to be more. More! Then his chest heaved in uncontrollable sobs. Was this how his life was destined to end? He had survived the initial conflagration, a Mideast nuclear war waged for the most part with warheads purchased from the money-starved "nee countries" of the former Soviet Union. A war that ended much more quickly than it had begun, since all sides succeeded in annihilating one another. Then came the enormous clouds of chemical and biological fallout from the weapons which were either deliberately launched, or just ignited by themselves in some sort of terrible chain-reaction. These combined with the radioactive fallout to create a "soup" that the Devil himself would have tried to run from...if he could. If anyone could. Then Mother Nature seemed to have had enough, and tossed her hat into



the ring. The Ozone Layer winked out of existence. He remembered most seeing birds and insects falling from the sky, trailing wisps of smoke behind them like the downed planes in those old world war II reels. Nothing was spared. Well, almost nothing. He was here, and he had seen other survivors, some human. Mostly however, the survivors have been a few isolated cacti, some cockroaches and beetles. Once, he thought he'd seen the silhouette of a dog shimmering in the heat of the distance. But it loped off over the horizon long before he could reach it. Too bad, it would have made a handsome meal for several days.

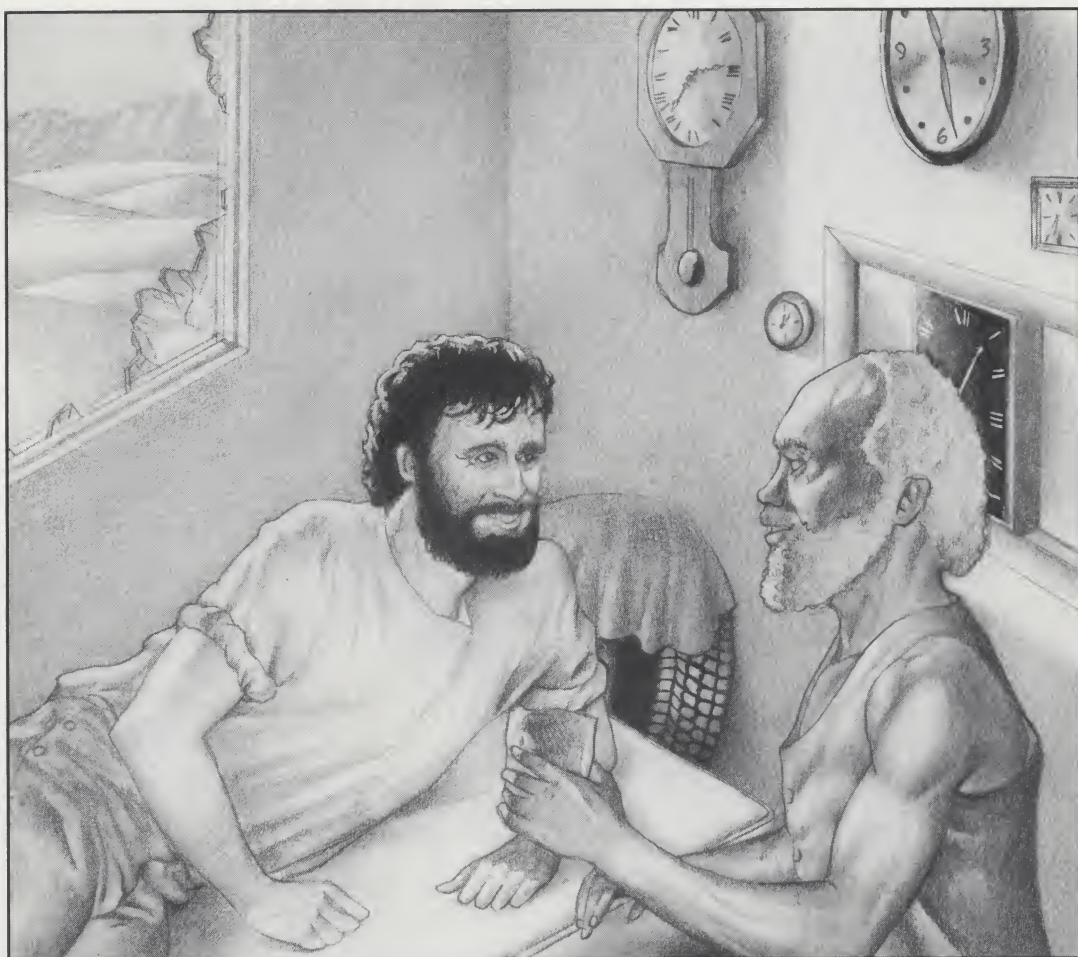
"You should not lay upon the hot sand that way," a voice said. "It will suck the very marrow from your bones." Startled, he looked up in the direction from which the voice had come. There was a man standing in the booth. 'Now I know that I have truly gone mad,' he thought. "Come on, up. Up!" The man in the booth urged him pleasantly. He followed the man's advice and stood up, albeit; shakily. He took a feeble step towards the booth, and the man inside produced a gun from beneath the window. "You may stop there, my friend," he said. "I can see you and speak to you very well at this distance." The man in the booth eyed the other man critically. "Oh, you do look most terrible. You must have come from such a long way." Then he smiled again and spread his arms wide. "But then, any way is a long way from this place." The man in the booth chuckled, then his eyes narrowed suspiciously and his smile disappeared into his thick beard. "What is your name, wanderer?" He asked. A minute passed. Then another. Another minute was about to pass into oblivion when the man standing outside finally spoke. "Ranglal," he said. The name sounded unfamiliar to him. His mouth felt strange forming itself around the alien sounding word. It had been a long time since the sound of his name had reached his ears. "My name is Outram Ranglal."

The smile returned to the face of the man in the booth. "Outram," he said. "That is good. My name is Yadrama. Just Yadrama. Just as you are now just Outram. I believe that under these most unusual circumstances we can make do without much formality. Is this not so?" Outram only shrugged. The specters of starvation, thirst, and insanity were all inside him, battling ferociously for the privilege of being the cause of his demise, and here he was having a conversation with a lunatic in a toll-booth! Perhaps he had died, and this was hell. Well, there's a question that he'd ask of the devil himself right now. "Do you have any water?" He took another step and pitched forward, gritty unconsciousness covering him like a blanket of hot sand.

He awoke, disoriented at first, and tried to dig himself out of his usual bed in the sand. But he found that he wasn't lying in sand, he was lying on a cot. He looked around the room, moving only his eyes. Then he remembered...He must be inside the booth. The small room

was cluttered with all manner of objects. From the ceiling hung a variety of small bones and animal skins. A dead rat's beady, black eyes stared down at him malevolently, baring fearsome yellow incisors as what was left of its pelt swung hypnotically in the hot breeze. An automobile tire leaned against one corner, a filthy rag draped over it. On one wall hung clocks of various shapes and sizes, all sharing only the fact that they didn't work. On another wall hung a huge thermometer attached to an ornate wooden plaque. It too was broken and useless. The other two walls were dominated by the big broken windows. The floor was hidden by rugs and carpets of all different sizes and colors, coming to a disorderly pile upon which Yadrama squatted; soothing Outram's hot brow with a dirty, wet rag. "Ah, so you are awake finally," Yadrama said. "I was afraid that you might have consigned yourself into the arms of your ancestors." He

Chemicals combined with the radioactive fallout to create a soup the the Devil himself would have tried to run from...

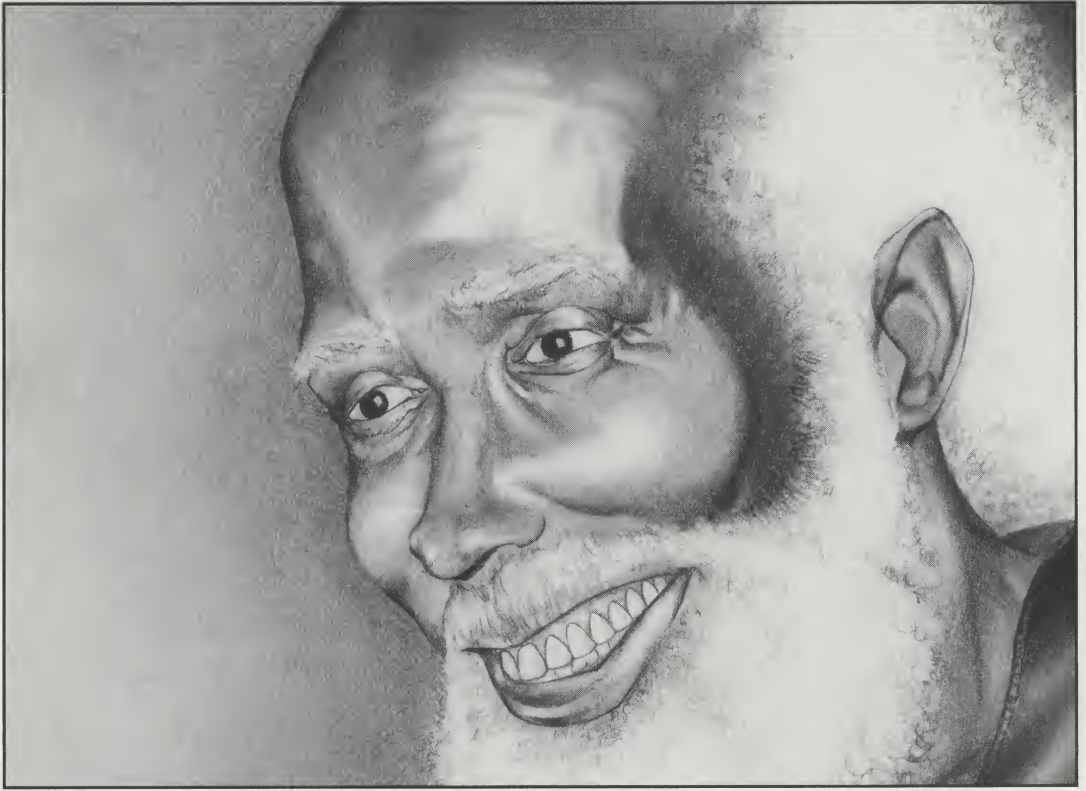


stopped wiping, and wrung the rag out over Outram's mouth. Outram swallowed the greyish water without hesitation, sucking on the rag when Yadrama stuffed it in his mouth. "More water," Outram said, removing the cloth from his mouth. Yadrama stood up and turned away, wiping his hands on his embroidered vest. "No," he said. "I will give you a little more water later, if you have too much so soon, it will make you ill." Outram fell back onto the cot, too tired to argue. Yadrama watched him curiously from another nearby pile of rugs. An hour passed before Outram felt strong enough to move again. He propped himself up on a shaky elbow as Yadrama, looking concerned, bustled over and gently placed a tin cup half-filled with brownish water to his parched lips. Outram swallowed every drop before falling back in exhaustion panting for air. Yadrama carelessly tossed the cup into a dark corner, which explained its battered

appearance, and helped Outram sit up. Outram closed his eyes for a moment as the room swam, and nausea tightened his throat. The sensation soon passed, and Outram was able to face his benefactor. "Where are we?" He asked, his hands clinging tightly to the sides of the cot.

"And what is this place?" "Where we are geographically, I do not know," Yadrama answered. "What this place is, is a toll-booth." Outram smiled, annoyed that this man would state the obvious. He inhaled in anticipation of the barrage of questions that he was going to ask, when Yadrama held up a hand to silence him. Outram exhaled, and waited.

"If you wish to know how this booth came to be here, I do not know. It was here when I happened upon it, much as you have, many months; perhaps years ago. I too was close to death, and I too was saved by the kindness of a stranger." At last Outram spoke, "There was



someone else here? Where is he? What happened?" Yadrama sighed patiently, then continued. "He has gone, as I shall now go." "Go?" Outram asked. "Go where?" He felt tears burning in his eyes, and he rubbed them away with the heels of his palms. "I do not understand," Outram said weakly. "Finally I find another human being..." "You shall understand," Yadrama replied. "But for now, have you not wondered how it is that we have not been broiled alive in this tiny edifice? Why, this tin box would be little more than an oven if not for the fact that it sits upon a huge asphalt slab that is constantly cooled by the rushing waters of an underground river!" Outram forced himself to sit up. "Water! So that is how you are able to survive here, you have water!" "Of course," Yadrama said. "Did you not just drink some? Did this water not just cool your brow? You ask simple questions, Outram; I thought better of you." Outram stared at the strange little man for several minutes. Yadrama sighed, then smiled. "You must forgive me, young friend," he said. "I was a teacher in my previous life; that is, my life before this..." Yadrama's eyes slowly circled the room. "Sometimes, I

forget that I am not speaking to a child." Yadrama's face suddenly twisted in anguish, "There are no more children." Outram shifted uncomfortably in his cot, then spoke in an attempt to break the silence. "You said that you were leaving." Yadrama nodded. "Yes, I am leaving tonight." "B-but why?" Outram spluttered. "You have water here! The world thirsts, and you would walk away from water?" Yadrama looked down at his dainty feet, sighed, and when he spoke again, his voice was steadier. "I have been here a long time. I have paid the toll; it is time to move on." Outram's eyes widened. "What are you talking about? What toll?" "The same toll you now must pay," Yadrama answered. "You see, behind this booth, is a sea of quicksand." Yadrama gazed out of the shattered rear window at the barren landscape behind the toll-booth. Outram craned his neck and looked too. It looked exactly like the rest of the desert. He turned and stared at his host again. 'This man is mad,' Outram thought. "I know what you are thinking, Outram. I thought the man who saved my life was insane when he told me this." Yadrama slid from his seat on the automobile tire

and helped Outram to his feet. "Come now," he said. "Let me show you." They stepped out though the rear door, and it was as if stepping into a furnace. The blood roared in Outram's ears, and he leaned on the little man for support. "I am sorry," Yadrama said, slowly lowering Outram to the ground. "Sit down; here the ground is cooler." To his surprise, Outram found that the ground was indeed cool! He dug his fingers in the cool sand and sprinkled some on his face and chest, it felt glorious! When he opened his eyes, he saw Yadrama standing next to a small pile of stones. "Watch," Yadrama said, as he tossed one of the stones into the desert beyond the booth. It reached the ground and sunk with barely a ripple. Outram's mouth hung open. "It's a trick!"

He said with more conviction than he felt. "No," Yadrama replied softly.

"No trick." Yadrama hefted another stone and tossed it underhand, closer to Outram's position. Outram watched as just inches in front of him, the stone disappeared beneath the sand's surface. Outram looked at Yadrama, who answered his unspoken question. "There is only one trail that leads through the desert of quicksand," he said. "It is the path the man before me took...and the path I shall take now."

"But why must you leave?"

"Because it is time," Yadrama answered. "I have been here a long time. Now I want to walk again, and see what there is beyond the desert."

Outram shook his head. "You're crazy," he said. "There's nothing out there but more sand! More death!"

Yadrama looked off into the distance. "But I want to see for myself."

"How will you survive!"

"How did either of us before finding this place? Karma? Stubbornness?" Yadrama continued; "And I have plenty of dried meat also."

"Meat?" Outram asked. Then he remembered the rat skins hanging from

the booth's ceiling.

Yadrama returned to the booth's interior, and Outram followed. Inside, Yadrama threw back some of the rugs and revealed two large jugs filled with water. They were tied to the ends of a stout pole. Yadrama reached behind the water jugs and produced a grease-stained cloth, bound with twine. He undid the string and removed a small piece of dried meat. He tore off a piece with his teeth and offered the rest to Outram; who accepted eagerly. Between bites, Outram informed Yadrama that he would accompany him when he left. "You will not leave here so quickly, friend Outram," Yadrama said. "Here,

Yadrama
gazed out
of the
shattered
rear window at the
barren landscape
behind the tollbooth.

there is water, food, and shelter. Are you so ready to leave it behind?" Outram stared. He couldn't answer. Finally, he lowered his head and shook it slowly from side to side. "Ah, I thought not," Yadrama said, resting his hand reassuringly on Outram's shoulder. "It appears that you are ready to pay the toll."

Outram stopped chewing. His anger boiled over, and he tried to shout, but he only succeeded in producing a harsh, croaking whisper. "What is this toll you keep talking about? There is no toll! There is nothing anymore! Nothing! Can't you see that?" He leaned his back against the wall, dislodging two small clocks that fell onto the carpeted floor with muted thuds.

"You say there is nothing, Outram," Yadrama said, fingering the frayed edge of a nearby rug. "Yet, here we are, you and I...and this booth." "Ah, this booth," Yadrama continued. "It has been a boon and a prison to me." Yadrama's eyes narrowed, and he faced Outram. "There have been four others before you," Yadrama said. "One tried to take this place from me by force, with no regard to the toll. He felt that there wasn't enough room, food, or water to sustain us both," Yadrama absently patted the place in his waistband where he carried the gun. "The poor man was obviously disturbed." Outram didn't ask what had happened to

this man.

"Two others showed up later, each several months apart, but each left after staying only a short time. I provisioned them with food and water, and pointed out the safe path into the quicksand desert. They walked into the desert while I prayed for their safe passage." Yadrama looked wistfully out at the desert, dusk made the sand dunes look like the waves on a crimson sea. "They had such promise," he finally said. "I know not what became of them. The last one before you did not even bother to stop here. The poor soul barely glanced at the booth as he continued into the desert beyond." Yadrama noticed the look on Outram's eyes. "Oh no, friend Outram," he said. "I called out to him several times, but he did not even slow down. By the time I left the booth and had run to where last he had been, he was gone. Another victim of this accursed place."

Outram took a deep breath, then exhaled noisily. "Yadrama," he said wearily. "So, what is this toll you keep telling me about?"

Yadrama searched Outram's eyes carefully before he spoke again. "This is," he said, slowly spreading his arms as he indicated the booth's interior. "You must stay, as I have, until someone else comes along who is willing to take your place here."

Outram stared, then broke into laughter. "Is that all? I already said I was going to stay, so what's the big deal?"

"The 'big deal' as you say, is that once I leave, you will be the only one who will know the only safe route through the desert of quicksand. Only you. If you were to leave without anyone taking your place, others coming this way, who had struggled to stay alive as we had, would die terrible and needless deaths. There have been enough 'terrible and needless' deaths. It would be a crime against what remains of humanity to let others die in our wake, simply because no one was here to point out the safe path."

"So why don't you stay?"

"If you refuse to stay, then I will," Yadrama replied soberly.

"Well, then, why not just leave a map?" Outram was being deliberately

difficult. It felt good to be in control for a change.

"Because," Yadrama answered. "There is no guarantee that it would be found, that it would be interpreted properly."

Outram suddenly had a vision of the quicksand claiming hundreds of innocents (if, indeed, hundreds of anybody were left) whose only crime was their lack of map-reading skills. Yadrama captured his attention again by pressing something heavy into his hands. It was the gun. "I pray you'll never need it," he said.

Yadrama carried his supplies out of the booth door, into the increasingly cold desert night. Outram joined him outside, and tried to rub the cold out of his hands. "The rugs will help to keep you warm at night," Yadrama said. "Some I also use to hang before the windows."

"Thanks," Outram replied, only slightly sarcastic. Then he took the pole with the water jugs and carried the unwieldy contraption across his shoulders. Yadrama gave him a thankful look, and started through the desert, softly counting his steps. Outram smirked; he just couldn't get away from counting steps, could he?

Finally, after walking along what Outram figured was the outer fringe of the quicksand desert, Yadrama stopped walking and counting. "Four-hundred-and-two," he said breathlessly. Outram lowered the heavy jugs to the sand. He doubted that he could have gone much further. When he straightened up, he joined Yadrama in looking out into the desert of quicksand. "So what if no one else comes?" Outram asked softly.

Yadrama answered without turning away from the desert. "That is the toll, the price that I have paid, and the price you must pay. It is a price of conscience."

"What if I get tired of waiting and leave anyway?"

Now Yadrama turned towards him. "But you won't."

Outram turned his gaze from the desert and looked into Yadrama's eyes. He was sure Yadrama knew the answer even before he voiced it. "No," he said. "I won't."

Yadrama nodded, smiled, hoisted the water jugs onto his shoulders, and walked off into the night.



OFFWORDS

In the future, this will be our letters column, where you our readers let us know what you think, feel, or want to see inside the pages of **OFFWORLD**. But for our premiere edition we thought you'd want to read a few words about the nature of the comics industry. Let us know if you agree or disagree, what do you think? Send all opinions c/o **OFFWORDS** Murray Hill Station P.O. Box 1109 NYC NY 10156-0604

Comic Books: Is there enough violence?

By: C. Morgana Winley

Once upon a time going to the corner store for candy and comics was an adventure, I liked to browse through the magazine racks and check out the new adventures of superheros or their latest traumas of the humorous kind.

The reason I say "liked" is because comics have changed a great deal in twenty years. The violence has become graphic to the extreme. For the past five or six years readers have been assaulted with a variety of battles, where the so-called "hero" gives the bad guy a well deserved butt kicking. While the "butt-kicking" is going on the reader is treated to a vivid display of torn battle garments, bruised limbs and a liberal splattering of blood. Not to mention a heady dose of language you can hear on any street corner.

Twenty years ago when the hero fought someone it was to either defend themselves or the innocent. Then your typical villain was a mugger, bank robber, or at the very most an evenly matched supper baddie whose only interest was to get the money. You knew who was who. Without the use of a detailed index, explaining why the character was acting in such a bizarre manner.

All I read about now are Malcontents, Psycho-killers and Deviants who are supposed to be the "good" guys! Honestly, if I were to see them in battle I would wonder who was who, they all look alike and sometimes you cannot tell by their actions if they are fighting a just cause.

True, readers of comics are no longer ten-year-olds who have to scrape up money to read about their heroes, they are Wall Street "Suits", Paramedics, Salespersons and yes even Lawyers. So the comic industry is writing and drawing to a mature audience who wants to read hard hitting material. Granted, there are comics which start off a plotline with good characters, excellent writing and graphics to make you sit up and take notice, but before long the main character goes on a so-called justifiable "Berserker Rage" and all his good qualities and efforts have gone down the drain.

Some of us out here are drawn to a crafted plotline, beautifully presented artwork and intriguing characters we can identify with. Especially ones who care for one another and things like honor, loyalty, truth, and yes, even love. Perhaps it amy be too much to ask if the industry toned down on the needless mayhem and concentrate on things that really count to make their audience think rather than seeing twisted limbs and the glint of blued steel from the blunt nose of a smoking gun. People want to read a little more about reasoning and understanding what motivates their enemies rather than shooting some sense into them. If they are shot, I want a firm reason why, not just because the hero has a grudge against the villain and wants to even the score. After all, if a hero does that he is worst than the enemy and ceases to be a nero.

Why am I saying all this? Because **OFFWORLD** will deliver to its audience fresh plots and eye-catching artwork without pandering to unnecessary violence and exploitive sex. People want to read stories without having their minds insulted. So treat yourself, read a copy of *new* adult science fiction entertainment. I invite you dear gentlebeings to enter the realm of **OFFWORLD**!

CONTRIBUTORS

MICHAEL WM. KALUTA our first cover artist whose art is also featured in our centerfold, has been illustrating in the comics field for over the last 20 years which includes his famed stint on the DC Comics mid 70's version of *THE SHADOW*. He was one of the founders of the famed *STUDIO* which also included *BERNIE WRIGHTSON*, *JEFF JONES* and *BARRY SMITH*. Most recently he's illustrated several covers for Dark Horse Comics'.

GEOFFREY NOTKIN the author of *Return Post* was born on 16th St. in Manhattan, and then was raised in London, England. He's been living in the U.S. since 1980. Where he's worked on a number of professions which have included radio D.J., librarian, construction worker, graphic artist, editor, and bass guitarist in a punk rock band.

LURENE HAINES the artist for *Return Post* has been illustrating extensively in the comics field for several years.

NAT GERTLER the author of *The Neighborhood* was, he claims, born at an early age. This head start allowed him to graduate Simon's Rock College at age 18. He has written for practically every comics' company around which currently includes stories for *ElfQuest* and *Zen the Intergalactic Ninja*. His work will be also be appearing in *Shock Rock 2* from Pocket Books. *The Neighborhood* is his first prose story.

LAURA FREEMAN the artist for *The Neighborhood* who over the last decade has been illustrating for various publications and companies. Including the New York Times book Review, the Chicago Tribune, and Polo Ralph Lauren. She is currently writing and illustrating several children's books.

RICK WILBER the author of *He wonders, as he cut his way*. Recent stories have appeared in the anthologies *Whisper of Blood and Alien Sex*. His stories have appeared in many of the science fiction anthologies on the market.

JUSTIN LEITER the artist for *He wonders, as he cut his way* is a fresh face in the business. His art has been featured in the comic *Plasma Baby*.

MICHAEL MARKOPOULOS the author of *The Thief* lives on the west coast working on movie scripts.

NATHAN MASSENGILL the artist for *The Thief* is also a fresh face in the business. He's just finished his first Graphic Novel, for Raven Publications entitled *Fenry*.

FRANKLIN DELANO CARR the author of our poem *Their are no dragons* is making his debut.

BARB ARMATA the artist for *Their are no dragons* has illustrated for many of the science fiction magazines on the market.

ORIANA WHITNEY DAMASCUS the author of *The Toll* has written several short stories for various magazines. Currently making her home on the Fiji Islands, she is an accomplished student of Asian studies and frequently includes personal experiences in her stories which have appeared in *Fiji Revue*, *The Island Gazette*, and the *Samoan Digest*.

TONY WILLIAMS the artist for *The Toll* as well as our *NOMAD PIN-UP*, has been illustrating for over ten years. Some of his clients have included Ralph Lauren, Odyssey Books, and Victory Comics. Currently illustrating an album cover for Renaissance Records, his work has also appeared in art galleries, magazines and posters (including our promotional poster). He is also our *Creative Consultant*.

NEIL FEIGELES Along with being the publisher and leader behind our new magazine, Neil's artwork is featured in our *TRIBUTE* to the motion picture *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*. Neil has illustrated book covers, advertisements for film and video packages and magazine articles. Some of his clients have included, ABC Television, Pocket Books, Silhouette Romances, Atheneum Books, and over thirty covers for Personality Comics. Currently most of his time is spent putting together the entire package, from the initial design to the promotion of *OFFWORLD*. Neil is beginning two long term projects. One a celebrity oriented coffee table art book, and the other a major 300 page science fiction graphic novel.

AT OFFWORLD

We're out to make the best science fiction and fantasy magazine possible. So we would like to find out about our readers. Who they are, what they're into, and what they want? Please take a few minutes to answer these questions.

IF YOU WOULD PREFER TO PHOTOCOPY, PLEASE DO.

1. Sex & marital status: ☐ Male ☐ Female
☐ Married ☐ Single

2. Age: ☐ Under 18 ☐ 18-24 ☐ 25-34
☐ 35 or over

3. Education: ☐ Attending H. S.
☐ H. S. Graduate ☐ Attending College
☐ College Graduate

4. Employment Status (check one):
☐ Full Time ☐ Part Time ☐ Student
☐ Unemployed

5. Occupation (Please specify):

6. Which of these do you own? (check all that apply):
☐ Car ☐ Hi-Fi System ☐ Color T.V.
☐ CD Player ☐ VCR ☐ Camcorder
☐ Laser Disc Player

7. If you own a computer (Please specify):

8. What type of books do you like to read (check all that apply):
☐ Hardcover ☐ Paperbacks
☐ Magazines ☐ Comic Book

9. What are the type of stories you're interested in (check all that apply):
☐ Adventure ☐ Fantasy ☐ Heroic
☐ Horror ☐ Humorous ☐ Psychological
☐ Science Fiction ☐ Splatter
☐ Supernatural ☐ Super Hero
☐ Other _____

10. List some of the books that you've read in the last 3 months:

11. List the other magazines that you normally read:

12. What comic books do you read regularly?

13. What graphic novels have you read in the last 3 months?

14. Please list who your favorite authors and artists are. And/or who you would like to see appear in OFFWORLD.

15. How long have you been reading science fiction? (check one):
☐ 1 year ☐ 2 - 5 years ☐ 6 - 10 years
☐ 11- up

YOUR VIEWPOINT COUNTS!

16. What is your favorite form of SF

(check all that apply):

- ☐ comic book ☐ magazine ☐ short story ☐ novella ☐ novel ☐ T.V show
☐ movie ☐ other _____

17. Where do you buy most of your SF

(check all that apply):

- ☐ bookstores ☐ book clubs
☐ comic shops ☐ conventions
☐ newsstand ☐ speciality stores
☐ other _____

18. Which of the following magazines do you read (check all that apply):

- ☐ Aboriginal SF ☐ Amazing
☐ Analog ☐ Interzone ☐ Omni
☐ S F Age ☐ Locus ☐ Isaac Asimov's SF
☐ S F Chronicle ☐ other _____

19. What Television Shows do you watch?

20. What Movies have you seen in the last 3 months?

21. What do you like least and best about the way science fiction is handled in magazines?

19. What do you like least and best about OFFWORLD?

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FINAL THOUGHTS

I would like to thank each and every one of you for buying a copy of our Premiere edition of OFFWORLD Magazine. Honestly, to thank you isn't enough...I should also congratulate you!

You have picked up what is now referred to on almost every single book with a special cover, or polybag...a TRUE "collector's edition".

You see my friends, colleagues, and family. Because of confusion over the way we promoted OFFWORLD, or the fact that our magazine is comic sized and features talent which includes names from the world of comic books, people weren't exactly sure what we were presenting. So because of this and other reasons, we only printed 6,000 copies of our Premiere edition.

There will never be a 2nd printing. The only way that you will ever have a copy of OFFWORLD # 1 is by doing what you did. Or by waiting and buying this edition from a dealer for too much money! We do have plans in the future, on possibly doing an Anthology featuring material from OFFWORLD, but it will never be presented the same way or solicited as OFFWORLD # 1 again. Finally, this special Premiere edition is what you see, a very limited edition. Not your typically limited edition of say 30,000 like most small press companies.

Starting with edition two...
the print run will expand, as your interest in us grows.

Speaking of which, If you know of other people interested in GOOD, QUALITY, THOUGHT PROVOKING, and VISUALLY STIMULATING Science Fiction and Fantasy; tell them about us! Tell the comic or specialty shop where you bought this copy of OFFWORLD, to order more in the future; starting with edition two. If you truly feel, after you've read edition one, that we accomplished what we set out to do, then I ask you to spread the word about us...

Our thinking has always been that readers want, deserve better than what they have been receiving. Better writing, better art, better commentary. We feel that we have accomplished that goal. You be the judge. Let people know...let us know.

Mal Feigle

